MONKEY BONE ISLAND

Street Mystery Files #1

By

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CONCH CHOWDER
BOTTLES OF TIME
JOURNEY TO BANTAY
THE KEYS TO FOUNDER'S HALL
THE PLANET SURFACE AT MILE ZERO

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to the good friends I knew throughout my life. All of you are near and dear to my heart. You know who you are. God bless you.

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"When you are dealing with monkeys,
you've got to expect some wrenches."
Alvah Bessie

CHAPTER 1

The face of Carlos Cortez was burnt by the sun a reddish brown. His skin appeared stretched tight over a slender muscular frame kept firm by constant motion. People usually saw him wearing dirty blue jeans and striped shirts. What they remembered most about him was his custom rattlesnake boots and the two gold caps covering his top incisors.

He was a hunter of animals long before he became a killer of men. He disappeared for weeks hunting with his father tracking deer and mountain goat. The family ate the meat of the animals they shot and supplemented their diet with corn tortillas, rice and beans. His mother bought coffee, cooking oil, butter and syrup when there was any extra money to spend. Theirs was a harsh existence with few luxuries.

The family lived in a small house at the foothills of the Sierra Madre mountain range. It was an unforgiving arid land that allowed few mistakes. The property had an underground aquifer beneath it. This water gave the property value. His father gave up long ago trying to irrigate the land due to the cost, so his wife grew vegetables in pots or discarded fruit crates she found in town.

His life changed in 1970. That was the year his father died. A mountain lion suddenly appeared on the trail and their horses panicked. His father's horse threw him and he fell to the ground, fracturing his thigh close to the hip. A bone shard cut the femoral artery and he died quickly from internal bleeding. Carlos held his hand as he watched him pass away.

He buried his father in a shallow grave on the edge of the trail then nervously crossed himself when he finished filling the hole. He felt something watching him from a distant and wanted to leave the area right away.

His father's horse had long since ran down the trail. Carlos eventually found the animal in a clearing after tracking it for two days while the mountain lion followed him from a distant. He knew it was there so he devised a plan to lure it into the open so he could get a clear shot from his hiding place. The plan was successful and he loaded the carcass on the back of his father's horse and headed for home.

His mother knew something was wrong when he returned so late. She yelled at him for not giving her husband a decent burial. He was only sixteen when she did that. Carlos Cortez has been mad at the world ever since. He left home for good that day to take his revenge on all mountain lions.

He followed their footprints wherever he saw them as the obsession consumed him. He set traps when he found evidence of their presence, sometimes waiting for days to ambush them. Soon he had a stack of their furs and a reputation around town as a mighty hunter.

Killing carnivores did not ease the pain of the loss. He thought he might have lived if he did something differently. Carlos blamed himself for his father's death. The result of this perceived failure was an internal anger that fermented like corn mash at the bottom of a still. Violence followed as surely as alcohol from the copper coil.

Carlos would rather spit than be around people preferring the solitude of the wilderness. He hated just about everybody, taking their lives when he felt the urge. He eventually became a hit man for the drug cartels plying his trade for lucrative contracts. He added to his income by selling weed to foreigners.

He saved the money from his assignments and kept the

jewelry from his victims as trophies. It had been 15 years since the death of his father. His victims today were a family from across the border. They were three gringos who were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Justin Wade did not plan to bring his family along. It just happened that way. He figured an exchange for ten pounds was not a big deal. Wade looked around for anything out of the ordinary as he drove up in the family car before parking in front of two rusty gasoline pumps standing guard in front of an old tin shack long since emptied and abandoned.

The sun was beating down on his car relentlessly that day. It was ten in morning and already ninety- five degrees in the shade. They saw him sitting on the hood of his truck with his rattlesnake boots resting on the chrome bumper. Carlos Cortez looked at the man exiting the car with pity then spat in the dirt.

The brown tobacco juice dripped from the side of his lip like venom from a snake fang before he wiped it on the sleeve of his denim jacket. He felt like a con man did ready to take down an unsuspecting mark. Cortez slid off the hood putting his boots on the ground and looked towards Wade as dirt crumbled under his heels.

“Are you Carlos?” Wade asked him nervously.

Wade felt something was not right. His instincts told him to get back in his car and drive away then and there. The man in front of him was holding his left arm too close to his body. Wade was convinced he was hiding something.

“Rico says you are O.K. Where is he?”

“He could not come,” Carlos replied in a voice devoid of emotion.

“He was supposed to be here,” Wade insisted. He was annoyed by the unannounced change of plan surrounding the exchange.

“I have what you want. Come and see,” Carlos said reassuring him.

Wade still sensed something. He was just not sure what it was. He thought it best to stall for time, enough to walk back to his car and leave.

"I think it best if we do this some other time. Forget it for now. I am out of here," Wade said. He turned his back on him to leave.

"Where is my money?" Carlos demanded.

Wade heard the click of the hammer of a gun locking into place. He pondered whether it was better to face the bullet or take it in the back. His heart was pounding now and sweat was already beading on his forehead like droplets of rain forming on a trembling cloud.

The gun pointing at him was a relic of the old West. It was an antique six- shooter taken off a dead horse thief by his great grandfather over a century ago. The last thing the dying man felt as he clutched the pistol was a cool breeze before an approaching storm.

Wade could not see the killer staring back at him because of the glare of the sun. They waited together in that decisive moment each transfixed as it stretched into forever. Carlos had his finger on the trigger. He finally spoke after what seemed like an eternity. His voice was solemn like that of a priest at a funeral.

"Give me the money friend and I might let your family live," Carlos demanded.

Wade thought it was odd he called him "friend." It was a remark as out of place as he was, standing in the middle of the desert making a dope deal. Wade considered the offer for a moment while Carlos felt he had already waited too long to shoot. His father's voice spoke to him inside his head.

"Kill as soon as you pull that pistol boy," The voice said.

Three shots cracked through the air as sharp as a whip. Wade clutched his chest like a gunfighter in a movie then fell to the ground. Carlos smiled as he watched his blood

soaking into the sand. Wade's body was in the dirt now. His hopes and dreams of an easy life in Key West were dying with him. Carlos stared at the mortally wounded man and felt no pity.

Tammy Wade saw her husband fall from the front seat of the car. She opened the door, ran to him and then kneeled beside him. She lifted his head out of the dirt, gently resting it on her knee. The holes in his chest were making a sickening gurgling sound. Blood was leaking out from both his lungs. He was drowning in the desert in his own blood. Then a tear appeared at the corner of his eye.

"I love you," Justin said softly.

"I'm here baby," His wife replied.

He lifted his hand reaching for his wife, wanting to touch her face one last time. Tammy took hold of his hand. It was then her husband passed away. She knew it was over the moment his pupils dilated into the blank stare behind the eyelids she would never forget.

Tammy Wade closed them gently with her finger tips then stood up to face his killer. Carlos pointed the pistol once more and pulled the trigger. She was four feet away when the bullet hit her in the forehead. This time Carlos did not hesitate. He watched her body slump to the ground with a thud.

Wade's son Van was sitting in the back seat when he heard the shots. He watched in horror as his father fell on the ground. He became terrified with fear when he saw his mother shot down like a dog. Carlos saw the boy through the windshield then walked calmly over to the car and opened the back door. The child yelled as he pulled him from the back seat by the hair.

"Get your hands off me," Van Wade said.

The boy was twisting, trying to get away. The killer held him in check grabbing a fist full of hair. The boy was pulling away but his soles were not getting any traction. A cloud of dust rose from around his feet as the boy's

sneakers scuffed the dirt. His efforts to escape were in vain.

The kid was scared. Carlos smacked him upside the head to settle him down. Then dragged him over towards the truck using more than enough force to move him on his way. Then he opened the back passenger door and tossed him inside.

He walked back towards Justin Wade's body. Carlos did not care if the kid got out and ran. There was no place for him to go. He would use the boy for target practice or let him die there in the desert if he decided to run knowing both actions would end with the same result.

He instinctively went for Justin Wade's watch first. Next he removed his wallet out of his back pocket. He rolled the corpse over, found the car keys and then walked behind the car to open the trunk. Carlos heard the rusty hinges creaking as he lifted the door. He saw only dirty carpeting and a rusty tire iron in the back.

"Stupid gringos. They do not even carry water, blankets or a spare tire. The desert should have killed them already," Carlos mumbled to himself.

Cortez slammed the trunk. The sound echoed off the walls of the station fading into the distance. He looked at the gas pumps. They reminded him of metallic gunslingers as he opened the front door on the driver side and saw the purse on the seat. The boy watched him as he picked it up and opened it. The money for the deal was inside two envelopes.

He thumbed through the cash then stuffed everything into the top pocket of his jacket. Carlos removed the registration and insurance papers from the glove box, took a lighter from his pocket, lit them on fire walking away as the burning ashes fell to the ground.

The boy was hiding in the foot well in the back now. He crawled out from the space behind the front seats and looked through the windshield at the killer. Then he covered his ears with his hands as he watched him walk

back towards the car.

Cortez opened the truck door and got inside. He kicked the boy for spite with the tip of his boot after he sat down. Then he slammed the door and started the engine. It was almost time for his mid-day siesta and the day already proved profitable. He enjoyed setting up traps disguised as drug deals. There were dead bodies all the way to the border from his past negotiations.

Cortez never brought drugs to the deals and the buyers never walked away. He killed them all stealing what he wanted. Today his mind was on Mr. Wade's car. He knew it was an American muscle car but was not sure how fast it would go. He wanted his mechanic friend Hector to take a look at it thinking he could paint it metallic green and install a better stereo system.

His favorite whore Rita would be impressed with the car. His money usually went into her bra strap at the brothel or to one of her friends when she was not working. He could not wait to play soft music for her on the radio. She had dark black hair and a voluptuous body with large breasts. He like how her robust thighs squeezed him tight when they conducted business.

Cortez drove back into town stopping at the first pay phone he saw. His Aunt Imelda told him to bury the bodies right away and to bring the child to her. She wanted the boy for slave labor on her marijuana plantation. She told Carlos she was proud of him and that he would receive a ten thousand pesos payment for the boy.

He wanted part of the reward in silver because he liked the sound coins made when he dropped them into his cash box. She agreed to his request. Five thousand pesos would be in silver coins and the rest in paper notes. His Aunt was getting a slave for life for next to nothing. She could do with him what she liked. Maybe she would sell the kid to the Creepers.

Wade felt the truck stop on the street. He waited for the

door to close then crawled up from the floor like a frightened prairie dog emerging from the ground. The boy looked through the windshield and saw Cortez by the telephone. He opened the door and slowly crawled down to the road. Van Wade took one last look at the killer from behind the front tire then he ran for his life.

Cortez became enraged when he discovered the boy was missing pounding his fists on the hood as the anger consumed him. His first reaction was to reach for his pistol and shoot somebody. He finally calmed down after several minutes knowing he let a great opportunity slip away.

His life's dream was to build a hacienda with a pool. He envisioned statues of angels at each corner pissing water. Just like the mansions of the movie stars featured on the soap operas made in The Homeland running day and night on local television.

He called his Aunt Imelda again confessing the boy was missing. She ordered him to find the child, reminding him he might run to the police. Carlos thought his Aunt was over reacting, wondering how far the kid could get by himself all alone in the city.

Cortez called Hector at the garage next telling him to meet him at the water tower at six. He said he had a car to tow and that he should bring two shovels to dig it out of the sand. It was late afternoon when Carlos returned to the gas station. He stared at the gas pumps silently waiting for Hector to arrive.

A dusty cloud eventually appeared in the distance after a couple of minutes. It was Hector in his tow truck. Carlos walked up to the open window when the truck stopped.

"There are bodies to bury. We must hurry," Carlos said.

Hector had seen plenty of dead people from car accidents, but never the victims of a crime. He was worried that Carlos might kill him when they finished the job. Hector opened the door hesitantly then got out.

The next thing he knew they were dragging the bodies

from behind the abandoned station. Hector went to the back of his truck and brought out the shovels and then they started digging. The sun went down as they made the graves. The light was fading on the horizon as they finished their task.

The sunset that evening was beautiful. There were grayish purple streaks across a backdrop of pinkish blue sky with a scattering of red and purple clouds. The twilight sky reminded Cortez of puffy bruises.

It was close to dark now and the temperature was falling. The two men hurried to attach the tow cable underneath Wade's car. They finished their task and climbed into their separate vehicles for the trip back into the city.

Hector's dogs behind the fence sounded as if they were announcing their arrival to the whole city. Hector got out and opened the gate then drove inside a parking lot filled with several cars in various states of disrepair.

The killer followed the truck then turned off his engine. He stayed inside when one of the dogs trotted over and began sniffing the front tires as if preparing to take a piss. Hector went to the driver's side window pushing the animal away with his knee.

"Paint it green and put in a stereo," Cortez suggested.

"No problem. Green is good," He answered.

Hector smiled when he saw the cash. Cortez gave him five hundred dollars of Wade's money for the paint job and the work needed to put in the stereo. Cortez told him to call him when the car was ready.

The mechanic fastened his fist around the money as if his hands were made of flypaper. He watched Carlos turn his pickup around and drive away. The breeze carried the dust from the tires into the air like smoke as the truck disappeared into the night.

Carlos Cortez lived across the street from a bar with no name. He finished most of his days sitting at the bar

quietly, staring at his own reflection in the mirror behind the liquor bottles. He enjoyed drinking tequila there. He did that frequently before sleeping believing it was necessary to power the violent dreams that came to him in the night.

Carlos took off his hat and set it on the dresser while looking at a painting on the wall. It was of two cowboys herding cattle on horseback through a mountain pass. One of the cowboys was riding a pale horse. The man in the painting reminded him of something he read in the Bible once.

He wondered if the man in the picture would be proud of the life he was living. The memories of his father seemed far away. Cortez reminded himself to visit the medicine man the next morning. He would tell him where to find the boy. Then he drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER 2

Twenty years later Van Wade walked to the principal's office at his former High School wearing his favorite tan khaki's, a white shirt, dark blue blazer and a steel and garnet tie. The smell of his cologne made his company tolerable if not inviting and his ensemble made it obvious that he was a man seemingly on a mission.

Wade detested interviews. He was at his former High School to meet with Dr. Devin at the Department of Community Education. He saw on his application that he was an alumnus, so he made his decision instantaneously. Wade's hiring was a clear case of nepotism in action. Such is life in the Conch Republic.

Van Wade looked around the campus on his way to the principal's office. There were plenty of indications of the gangster rap culture. Teenagers with name brand sneakers wearing tee shirts heralding their adoration for their favorite professional sports teams.

The students in the halls were dressed like students in any one of the public schools throughout the nation. There were tattoos on nearly everyone. The girls overemphasized their makeup and the boys tried to look tough. Wade's first impression was that the students cared more about the brand of their sneakers then their education.

The jocks in the right bloodline might have a job as a cop or a firefighter waiting for them if they did not leave town after they graduated. Those that did go usually joined the military. The rest would leave High School then enter the work force devoid of aspirations. Their next fifty years usually dedicated to menial jobs in a valiant attempt to pay for trailers on Big Pine Key they would eventually lose to the banks or the forces of nature when the island flooded during the occasional hurricane. Far too many students strutted the halls with their pants half down, wearing head

phones bee bopping to a thumping bass accented by vulgar lyrics completely unaware of the damage they were doing to their eardrums.

He arrived at the principal's office. A hall monitor on his way to scrounge a donut from the cafeteria gave him directions to the Department of Community Education. He would have to go back across the campus to another building. Devin's office was located in a complex adjacent to the cafeteria.

Wade eventually reached a gray steel door with a silver metal handle. Wade turned the cold metal handle and opened it feeling a blast of chilly air. The cool temperature inside was a welcome relief. There were five desks in a row on his right occupied by secretaries inside. A counter separated the students from the work area.

Each employee had their own desk which they cluttered with photographs and trinkets from home. The family pictures on the desktops reminded the employees why they sat there day in and day out tolerating the drudgery of it all.

There was another steel door leading to the inner offices at the end of the counter. The tile on the floor was filthy. A large flag heralding the insignia of The Homeland on the wall above a gold framed picture of the previous Mayor who got himself fired because he tried to impose a ban on shell fish exports after a recent oil spill.

Wade approached the secretary closest to the door. He moved towards the counter admiring her bust line while inhaling the sweet scent of her perfume. A petite Hispanic woman with shiny black hair wearing a summer dress with tiny purple flowers was busy typing way. Wade looked at her cleavage then up to a pair of tired brown eyes nestled behind a pair of cat like eye glasses.

"Excuse me," Wade said in a friendly tone.

The woman typing at the desk momentarily glanced at Wade then back down at her typewriter. She made eye contact with him again after what seemed like too long a

pause. Wade smiled at her.

"Good morning. My name is Van Wade. I have an appointment with Dr. Devin at ten," He said confidently.

The woman behind the glasses with the darling eyes was Lorraine Lavalier. She did not get much sleep the previous night because her boyfriend kept bothering her for sex. She was already two months pregnant with his baby and had accepted the fact he would not be the kind of husband or father her child required. She decided not to tell him about the baby figuring the situation might upset him enough to trigger another tirade of verbal abuse.

The two cups of coffee pulsing through her arteries were not helping her progress through her morning. She picked up the phone then punched in the numbers to Devin's office. An effeminate voice answered the phone down the hall.

"What is it Miss Lavalier?"

"Mr. Wade is here to see you," She answered.

He instructed her to send him to his office. Lavalier hung up the phone then looked up into his blue eyes. Thoughts of romance unexpectedly intruded into her morning. It was a pleasant momentary distraction from what would have been an uneventful day. Wade noticed her interest and instinctively glanced at her left hand searching for a wedding ring.

"Dr. Devin will see you now. Go through the door at the end of the hall to your right," Miss Lavalier explained.

Wade opened the door and walked to the office and knocked on the door.

Dr. Devin appeared to Wade like most administrators that spent their working lives sitting behind a desk. He was overweight with a drab complexion. He was shuffling some papers around looking for Wade's application when he knocked. He found it just in time under a purchase order for copy paper. The meeting was a formality. Van Wade was the man for the job. Dr. Devin extended his hand for the

customary shake and gave him a friendly smile.

"Thanks for stopping by Van. Come on in and have a seat. I had a chance to look over your resume. It looks pretty darn good. Says here you majored in Education and you have some teaching experience. That seems like a good place to start," Devin said.

"I worked in the projects for a couple of years. The program involved juvenile delinquents after their first arrest. We tried to steer them in the right direction before they ended up behind bars," Wade replied.

He wanted to give him more details about the job, but Devin already seemed disinterested. He was not listening to him. The fact was he had not paid attention to anyone in a professional sense after he received his Doctoral degree online from an obscure college named after their dead founder.

"Out there you only have to teach diploma classes. That covers students that have up to and including a ninth grade education. You have to determine their grade levels by giving them a placement test. You will know if they are suitable for the program after you score the test. Refer them over to Kitty Nova at Readers in Motion for remediation if they do not pass. Some of your students will have orders from the Court to complete their studies," Devin said.

His effeminate tone then became noticeably more masculine changing quickly like the skin of a chameleon.

"The job demands flexibility. You have to teach all five of the subject areas covered in the State test. They include math, social studies, science, English and writing an essay.

Do you think you can handle that?" He did not wait for Wade's answer.

"Says here you like to box in your spare time? Sounds like this job will suit you just fine. I just hope you do not have to throw any lefts to those chuckle heads down at the jail. Things can get dicey over there. I guess you can take care of yourself," Devin explained.

He paused for a few seconds. Wade waited to see if he was going to say something else then responded quickly. He did not have a chance to speak up until now. Devin leaned back in his chair smiling waiting for his reply.

"I try to stay in shape. The training is a great workout and the ladies appreciate the effects on the physique," Wade said.

Devin disregarded the remark. He was gay and did not care who knew it. His wife learned he was a homosexual while they were in the middle of an argument. She traded what was left of her devotion to him for a vodka bottle after the relationship was finished. The fact she hid it in a brown paper bag did not bother her one bit.

Mrs. Devin explained to her therapist that she might have understood if he left her for another woman. The fact that it was a man was too much for her to handle. She suffered a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized for a week until she stabilized. Then she was prescribed a daily dose of Valium.

Devin moved into his own apartment by the time she returned home. Now he spends his Friday and Saturday nights looking for back alley release behind the gay bars. His ex-wife cries herself to sleep in the arms of her personal trainer when she is drunk or numbed to the hilt on pain killers.

Wade had no doubts about his sexuality. He was a heterosexual set in his ways believing God intended men to marry women. When a man and a woman loved each other, they got married. It was that simple. He reasoned this was what God intended for his children.

Wade as a rule avoided homosexuals thinking most demanded too much attention. He believed their real problem was they lacked any restraint. Wade thought the gays used their generous donations to push their agenda in the local paper and their kind managed to occupy key positions in local government. The gays had power and

privilege, although he thought they overestimated the amount they could wield at any given moment.

Devin wanted to end the discussion. He had other things on his mind. He was eager to stop by the cafeteria for a free bran muffin and some chocolate milk for his morning snack. He liked looking at the pictures of missing kids on the cartons thinking maybe one day he would see one of the trouble makers from his school make an appearance.

Sometimes he roamed the halls looking for kids without a pass after he finished his muffin. It was one of his many distractions used to occupy time before his retirement at the end of the school year.

“We will go ahead and contract with Readers in Motion. They are our partner in this project. The job will be for twenty-five hours a week. The pay is fifteen dollars an hour. You will be working at the jail teaching diploma classes. I will put you on a long leash. Turn your hours in every week to Kitty Nova,” Devin said.

Wade sensed Devin’s wanted to be someplace else. He was glad the interview was over and could not wait to lose the tie. He hated wearing them. He felt the person that invented them knew little about the top buttons of shirts let alone comfort. Devin's voice seemed far away.

“I will call the Programs Department over at the jail and let Tina Keene know you will be there Monday. They will have a desk ready for you. Give Donna Veto or Kitty Nova a call if you have any questions. You can pick up your check every other Friday from Kitty,” He said.

Devin stood up then handed him a credit card.

“Here’s your school district card. If you need anything for your classes just charge it. Do not buy any personal stuff like booze or jewelry. I remember one teacher bought a fantasy fest costume. I think it was a super hero outfit. I had to let her go. She left with a nice severance package then she went to prison. Bring any receipts to my secretary

Miss Veto at the end of the month.

I am sure you will fit in just fine. Try not to rock the boat Van. Key West is a small place and the ripples do not have far to go before they upset somebody. One more thing. I was kidding about not putting alcohol on the credit card. Go right ahead," Devin said jokingly. Wade smiled while thinking the comment was funny.

"I'll do my best to stay out of trouble," Wade said accepting the plastic card.

"That's the spirit," Devin replied. They shook hands again and Van Wade thanked him for all his help. The meeting was over. Devin was on his way to the cafeteria for his milk and muffin.

Wade walked back across the parking lot to a pickup truck that needed several repairs. There were spots of rust around the edges of both doors. The truck could definitely use a new air conditioner and fresh tires. It had been a series of continuous headaches since he bought it. He knew finding a decent mechanic on the island would probably be difficult.

The heat inside the truck hit him hard when he opened the door. He pondered his situation for a few moments after sitting down. Something was gnawing inside his gut. Wade thought it was probably just hunger pains and that he probably would feel better if he ate some food.

He drove away from the High School heading for the closest pit stop selling burgers. It did not take him long to find one. They permeated the landscape like waiting beacons for the hungry along the Boulevard.

Wade drove into a drive through with a smiling plastic hamburger statue out front with beady eyes embedded on top of a two-foot wide sesame seed roll with dark eyebrows supported by wires in midair. He then proceeded into the driveway stopping at the first window. He ordered two cheeseburgers, large fries and a soda from the metal box which then instructed him to advance to the pick-up

window.

Wade handed the pimple faced cashier in the polyester uniform the credit card Devin gave him. She swiped it in the register then handed it back to him. Wade reached up and snatched the bag out of her hand faster than a starved parrot grabbing a peanut, tossing the food in the front passenger seat. The soda went into the plastic drink holder above the emergency brake. The smell of the grilled meat and fried potatoes filled the car making him anticipate the upcoming meal that much more.

He thought about the interview on the way back to his efficiency apartment. The property owner was Dinah Fritz. She stood five feet tall and constantly adorned herself with cheap cosmetic jewelry. She held her hair in place by far more hairspray than was necessary. Fritz always wore a pair of tortoise shell sunglasses that were too big for her head making her look like a bizarre insect from another world.

Her husband died a few years ago and she was having a hard time adjusting to life alone and making ends meet. She dulled the pain of her loss with alcohol and tried desperately to enjoy her Friday afternoon cocktails with an odd assortment of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transvestite friends.

The cast of characters met socially in her yard once a week under a canopy that was more suited for camping than entertaining guests. Dinah could have won a trophy for the perfect Screwdriver. She added a peppermint leaf to convince those drinking her free booze that she had some class.

She owned the house with the apartment in the rear. She rented the place because the taxes on the property and the utilities needed paying every month. She offered it to him because she liked having a man around to talk to in case she got bored with her pet pug.

Van Wade lived at the back of a house. It was accessible

by a gate leading into in the back yard. There were boxes filled with personal belongings stacked inside along the wall. The furniture consisted of a chair, a wooden table and a faded maroon sofa that looked like a cat had gotten the best of it for a long time.

Wade spent the rest of his day organizing. He was quite proud of the arrangement when he was finished. He sat down on the couch and picked up the remote control and turned on the television flicking through the channels until settling on a delayed broadcast of a local softball game.

Wade was shifting his body around on the couch trying to get comfortable when the phone rang. He picked it up on the third ring. It was Kitty Nova. He considered going down to her office after the meeting with Devin, but he did not feel like talking with anyone else that morning. Food was the only thing on his mind.

"Van Wade here," He said.

"Hi Van. This is Kitty Nova at Readers in Motion. I just wanted to know if you needed any school supplies like notebooks or pencils. My office is on Duck Avenue. There is a big red, white and blue sign out front," Kitty said. She waited for him to say something. Van Wade was barely listening. The pause lasted several seconds before she said something else.

"I want you to stop by after work on Monday. I need you to fill out the forms for your taxes and a couple of other pieces of paperwork," Kitty added.

Van was hoping to keep the call a short one. He was not in the mood for idle conversation. The Sunfish were threatening to score with a man on second while the Clownfish pitcher looked nervous digging up the dirt of the pitcher's mound with the tip of his cleat. Wade wanted to hang up just as Kitty was gearing up for an infomercial about herself.

"I think there are supplies at the jail. I will let you know. My number is in the book. Call anytime if you need

anything. You can call me Kitty. Everybody does. My daddy gave me the name because I was born the same day our cat had kittens," Kitty explained.

"That's interesting Miss Nova. I don't want to seem impolite but I have something on the stove," Wade said with a feeling indifference towards her remarks.

Kitty wanted to practice familiar lines usually reserved for strangers in a bar or potential clients at her night job with the escort service. She held back now that she knew Wade had other things on his mind.

"I look forward to meeting you Van," Kitty said.

"Goodbye Kitty," Wade replied. He hung up the phone looking back at the television. The Clownfish were at bat now. The score was tied and it was the bottom of the third inning. Wade sat back down on the sofa. Several minutes passed by before he eventually fell asleep.

He dreamed of the desert cacti and blood soaking into the sand. There was silhouette of a man wearing a cowboy hat and then the glitter of his gold tooth. The dream wavered going out of focus. Then he was flying looking down on a scenario with an Indian doing a ceremonial dance holding up a rattlesnake high above his head while chanting in front of a painting in the sand

Wade woke up three hours later. His head was pounding with the force of a base drum as he looked around the apartment. The place seemed unfamiliar at first. He glanced over at the neon green numbers on his clock radio and remembered where he was. It was almost four in the afternoon.

CHAPTER 3

The cops knew Jacques Tarri very well. They joked that his anti-social behavior was the result of too much tension in his dreadlocks reasoning that the braids were weaved too tight. Tarri had plenty of arrests. He stayed out of jail because he had a great lawyer. His long list of crimes was as colorful as the postage stamps from his native French Guyana.

Last week he broke into a pharmaceutical firm and stole 25,000 tablets of quinine. He traded them to a South African crime syndicate for two elephant tusks that now stood like sentries at the entrance of his apartment. It was another one of his notorious inside jobs. Such is life in the criminal underworld of Miami.

Today was Saturday and Tarri was trading weapons for human cargo with some of his Cuban friends. The Lopez twins were waiting for him on the top level of a parking garage across from the new baseball stadium. They did not have long to wait.

Tarri drove up the ramp in a white town car with burgundy leather seats. He parked next to the van and got out. Umberto rolled down the window in anticipation. Tarri reached up and shook it.

"You have some cargo for us?" Umberto Lopez asked. He was trying to conceal his excitement as he leaned his face out the van window.

"Yes I do," Tarri answered with a French accent.

He walked to the back of his car and opened the trunk. There was a rectangular wooden crate and a metal box containing ammunition. The Lopez brothers exited the van and followed him. One of the brothers opened it by sliding the lid off. The brothers then began inspecting the weapons. Rico picked one up pulled the bolt back and looked inside the chamber then clicked it back into place and checked the

trigger. Satisfied; he put the weapon back in the crate and closed the lid.

Jacques waited patiently while the other twin examined the guns. They lifted the crate out and carried it over to the van when he was done. Tarri opened the back door and looked inside. There was a woman there lying on her side with a gag in her mouth and hands tied. Jacques pulled her out by her feet. The woman stood up when her legs dangled over the bumper.

Her feet were numb and began tingling as the blood rushed back to her feet. Jacques held her steady with one hand while inspecting her eyes, breasts and buttocks. Then he examined the veins in her arms looking for needle marks. He pulled her gums back and looked at her teeth like a veterinarian inspecting a horse. Then he smiled.

"This *is* very nice merchandise," Jacques said.

Jacques ran his fingers through her blonde hair. He knew the buyer would be more than satisfied. She was going to be the latest addition to someone's private harem. Afterwards she would be hooked on heroin and put to work in the stables attending to the carnal desires of the miners when the owner of the company got tired of her face.

He was satisfied with the sale. That meant he liked the profit margin. He would sell the woman for more than three times the amount he paid for the guns. The case of 12 AR 15's cost him sixteen thousand dollars. His human cargo would sell for as much as fifty grand.

The twins took their merchandise back to the van while Jacques poked and prodded Connie Jarvis like an old woman feeling up plums at the local grocery store. He gripped her hips with both hands and rocked them back and forth estimating their fat content. Then he pushed the woman towards the trunk of the waiting car.

Tarri turned around for a moment to say something to one of the twins when Jarvis felt his grip loosen. She seized the opportunity and made a break for the stairwell. She was

gone before Tarri's brain registered what happened. Jacques looked towards the entrance to the stairs several yards away and saw a flash of her clothing.

Jarvis ran to the stairwell and slammed the door open with her shoulder before running down the stairs. It was difficult to keep her balance since she could not hang on to the handrails. She managed to reach the ground floor without falling down the stairs.

Then she saw the ticket booth. A man was watching television inside behind a sliding glass door. Jarvis ran towards the light screaming in a panic.

"Please help me," Jarvis begged.

The man looked up from the television and saw the women coming towards him. She put her hands on the glass and began kicking at the sliding glass door. The parking attendant inside stood up and backed away while Jarvis screamed again.

"Help me," She pleaded.

Tarri saw her at the tollbooth as soon as he came out of the door at the bottom of the stairwell. She was about to run out the front entrance when Jacques pointed a pistol at her.

"Don't you move," Jacques warned.

Jarvis looked at the handgun then raised her hands. The tires of the van came screeching to a halt next to them. Jacques closed the distance quickly. He grabbed her by the hair then hit her with the side of the pistol. She moaned in pain as the metal slapped against her skull with a clack. Blood flowed freely into her hair from the fresh cut in her scalp. The weapon discharged and the sliding door of the booth came crashing down as the bullet struck the glass.

The parking attendant slumped down out of his chair to the floor. He tried to lift himself up off the ground, but one of his arms did not work. Jacques dragged the woman to the side of the van and opened the sliding door. He pushed her inside onto a box of pillowcases. Jarvis scraped her elbows as she hit the metal floor. Tarri got in and pulled the

door shut from inside.

"Drive me back to the top hurry," Tarri said.

Rico spun the steering wheel and the tires peeled through the parking lot. The van was back on the roof in seconds. Jacques opened the door and yanked her out feeling the blood on his hand.

Jarvis tried to use her legs for advantage against his grip. Tarri drew his arm back and hit her square on the chin. The punch knocked her out cold and Jarvis fell to the ground. He picked up her limp body and tossed it inside the trunk then slammed the door.

"We have to go. Sorry it got so messed up," Rico said from the van window. Tarri accepted the chain of events as part of doing business.

"Don't worry about her. The buyer will fix her wagon. She will be on her back in some brothel for the miners when Viper Mining gets a hold of her," Tarri replied.

He was laughing as he started the engine. Then the two vehicles sped down the ramp, out of the garage and into the street. The twins went back to their hotel while Tarri drove towards the port of Miami.

CHAPTER 4

The iguana in the palm tree overlooking Imelda's back yard stared at the pool below. It was warming itself in the morning sun for the last hour and was now considering launching itself into the coolness of the water. It had done so on numerous other occasions without being noticed. The lizard slowly turned its attention to Imelda who was lounging in a deck chair with a glass of lemonade in her hand. Her plump body well shaded under an umbrella that looked like half a beach ball on a giant stick.

She felt the chill of the ice in her palm from the side of the glass as she watched her lesbian lover Marissa meandering in the shallow end. The woman in an orange thong pushed away an inflatable alligator as Imelda set down her glass. Cortez was sulking. Last Friday's bank drop was gone and the two people responsible for the drop were missing. What she needed more than anything was information.

She picked up her cell phone and placed a call to one of her laundries. Senora Lopez answered the phone. She was from Acapulco, immigrating with her family in the 1980's. Senora Lopez was from a family of migrant workers that made their living picking vegetables. She broke the family tradition when she began growing marijuana in the 1970's.

Imelda greeted her cordially and inquired about her health. Then she politely asked her if she had seen Umberto or Rico. The woman told her she had not seen the brothers. Imelda lied telling her that they had forgotten to sign for their checks last Friday. The woman assured Carlos she would have them call her back as soon as possible.

Marissa stood up and dove into the deep end of the pool swimming the short distance to her lover in the shallows. She had long brown hair braided in the back into a pigtail. Her emerald green eyes and high cheekbones made others

quiver with nervousness in her presence.

Her neck was adorned with several gold chains. Most of them were presents from men over the years claiming her affections. The heaviest one was from Imelda. Most women resented Marissa on sight because she was so beautiful. Her body was firm from constant exercise and she was always willing to fulfill Imelda's most intimate desires.

Imelda brought her close and kissed her flush on the lips then gave her a saucy smile. She could feel her nipples harden against her own breasts. Marissa did not pull away when Imelda reached down and grabbed her buttocks firmly with both hands and gave her another kiss. She exhaled with contentment when their lips parted.

Cortez considered having her right there in the pool when the cell phone on the table rang. Imelda let her go feeling the disappointed of not being able to finish what she started then climbed out of the pool, grabbed a towel from the back of one of the patio chairs and picked it up.

"Hello," Imelda said.

"Good morning Imelda," The voice replied.

The caller was Mr. Gills; the leading candidate for Mayor in the upcoming election.

"I missed you last Friday. Do I have to remind you of the trust we have placed in you? I hope you don't let us down. Meet your obligations. Enjoy the rest of your weekend. Relax by the pool or go to the movies. Go dancing at one of those clubs you like. Just have our money by Friday," Gills said before hanging up the phone abruptly.

Cortez tried to remember if anyone had ever disrespected her so completely. She despised Gills and political types in general thinking they were no better than dogs begging for scraps under her dinner table. This one was running for mayor of a crooked tourist trap aspiring to be *the* big fish in a small scummy pond. She would not hire him to unclog a toilet.

Her lawyer friend Marty Styles told her Gills was merely a desk jockey at the jail working as an accountant crunching numbers in the administrative offices and never carried a gun. He was a pencil pusher spending his days behind a desk. This meant to her that he had no backbone behind his rudimentary posturing. Imelda decided then and there to have him eliminated for his rudeness, despite the fact McGregor suggested she make a campaign contribution.

"I'm sorry baby, but I have errands in town. I'll be back in time for dinner. Could you please cook something Cuban? How about roast pork with yellow rice and black beans? Do not forget the fresh bread. You know how much I like the bread."

Marissa did not answer right away. She wanted some more attention from Imelda before she left her alone with the inflatable alligator. The tropical sun and the swimming had already made her tired. She felt like taking a nap as she climbed out of the pool.

"Can I come with you? I need to get out of the house. You never take me out anymore. Maybe you have another woman?"

Imelda loved her daily attempts at English. They were an aphrodisiac to her. She had heard it all before. She always tried to make her feel guilty. Imelda thought of her as a child in these moments and tried her best to be kind to her. She also realized discipline was sometimes necessary to make things more interesting and break up the monotony of kindness. Imelda answered her from the sliding glass door.

"Go for a walk before dinner if you want to get out of the house. We can talk about going to that new Spanish restaurant downtown when I get back. I have to go to the bank then up to the house on Big Pine," Imelda said.

Imelda Cortez was lying again. She did not trust bankers or their banks. The money barons were devious

enough to get the entire legal system behind them. That was a stroke of genius in her opinion. Imelda hated the fact banks demanded spotless credit to get money they created out of thin air.

She convinced herself a long time ago that the banking system was organized fraud. The Homeland was millions of dollars in debt *because* of the banking system. Their cancer of fractional lending had brought the nation to a fiscal cliff that would inevitably go into a free fall plunging the entire nation's economy into chaos.

Imelda was convinced anyone pursuing a dream involving money was under the power of the banks and their unscrupulous lawyers. That is why she kept most of her money at home in the bedroom safe. Banks were only used to perpetuate her illusion of legitimacy.

Miss Cortez was a very wealthy woman. The cocaine import business was only part of her criminal empire. Her influence extended into a plethora of other nefarious activities. She owned numerous properties, a chain of Laundromats, two restaurants and a dry cleaning business. The extra cash bought her influence around town. She thought about Gills one last time thinking he was a nuisance that had to be eliminated.

Today she had to go up the Keys to talk the tenants of one of her properties about some missing money. The Lopez brothers were not suspects yet, but she was not sure about their cousins Ana and Tara.

The two women had recently been smuggled into Big Pine Key from Cuba by her twin nephews. She went upstairs and changed into a pair of shorts, sandals and a blouse with surfboards on it. Cortez collected her purse, phone and keys from the dining room table.

Imelda went out the front door and got into a vintage green car in the driveway. The car was a present from her nephew Carlos. The same one he stole from Van Wade's parents over twenty years ago .Imelda took a right down a

side street and then a left onto U.S. 1. She leaned back in the black leather seats and stepped on the gas.

The engine growled like a panther as the car gathered momentum and raced down the black top north on U.S.1. She knew the journey would not take long since here were only a few cars on the road. The breeze from the windows cooled her body, but she still felt unsettled.

She could see the Atlantic Ocean on her right and dying mangroves on the left. Big Pine Key is one of several islands on the highway north from Key West to Homestead. It is most famous for a subspecies of deer too often run over by the tourists claiming to adore them. She looked at a sign indicating deer habitat recalling the one she ran down a few years ago.

It took her forever to get the fur out of the front end. She got a deal on the bodywork. The mechanic told her to bring the car to someone else if she ever hit another one. She remembered his green eyes and the attraction was instantaneous. He gave her a 50% discount when she was finished before using him as a boy toy for the afternoon.

She joked once to a friend that a swarm of mosquitoes could have picked up Big Pine Key and carried it away for all she cared. She saw the island from the air on a flight to Miami once and. the place reminded her of a runway in the middle of the ocean with a side order of construction debris and dead mangroves. She wondered how the realtors could justify the insane property prices.

Imelda turned onto Cutthroat Drive after passing Captain Clucks Deluxe Fried Chicken Stand. The makeshift road went on for a quarter of a mile with scrub brush and palmetto plants on each side. The gravel scrunched under the tires as she approached a large warehouse with a rusted corrugated iron roof.

There were rows of boats on slats on either side stacked high up into the air. The smell of marine chemicals filled the air. A few people were repairing their boats outside

while others were shopping for supplies in the ship's store. She drove through the yard heading towards the back left corner of the lot until another dirt trail came into view.

The air became musty with the smell of seawater mixed with decaying vegetation as she approached the canal behind her house. The vehicle came to a halt at the metal gate across the road between two posts. She got out and unlocked it. The road opened into a parking lot leading to a house next to a wooden pier.

The house was in need of several minor repairs when she purchased the property. The paint was chipping on the exterior and the yard had inadvertently become a storage area for lobster traps and several round trap buoys from the previous owner. The seller of the property needed cash so he included a lobster boat with the final price to sweeten the deal. Her not so new boat bobbed and creaked with the incoming tide bumping against two truck tires separating it from the dock.

She parked the car and got out. A noticeable breeze was coming in from the water. The wind echoed in her ears reminded her of the sound from inside a conch shell. She had not been to the property for a few months. She circled the house looking for anything else that might need repairing.

Imelda looked through the kitchen window after checking the window frames and did not see anything out of the ordinary. There was metal table inside with four wooden chairs around it and a sofa. She saw the stove and a refrigerator across the room in the kitchen area.

Cortez kicked the weeds as she made her way towards the back. A small brown lizard darted out from behind a pile of old brown coconuts then disappeared under a piece of plywood several yards away. She came to the front door from the other side and knocked. Then she went to one of the windows and looked through the glass. Nobody was home. Today they were working at the laundry.

She opened the door and entered the living room, her eyes adjusted slowly to the lack of light. The room was quiet except for the clicking sound of the ceiling fan above her head. There were two other rooms in the back of the house. The hall to her left led to a bathroom. Imelda went inside and closed the door.

Cortez washed her hands when she finished her business. Then she went back into the living room and sat on the sofa. She considered leaving right away, but thought it might be best to look around. Maybe she could find something to help her determine what happened to her money and where the Lopez brothers went.

She picked up the newspaper from the end table. The date was Friday. That was when her nephews should have deposited the money into the bank. Cortez set the paper down and looked at the table. There were four empty coffee cups and three unused sugar packets. Next to it were crumpled burger wrappers and two empty paper fry holders.

She saw a brown paper bag on the floor with a picture of a smiling hamburger with bushy eyebrows. She reached down and picked it up. There was a stale French fry, a receipt, along with two spent plastic ketchup packets inside. Imelda pulled the receipt from the bottom of the bag and checked the date. It was also from Friday afternoon.

Imelda doubted the two double crossed her, but the fact remained they were missing and so was her cash. She would not hesitate having Cortez gut her two nephews and fed to the sharks if they ever betrayed her. Then she felt a feeling rage overtake her.

She stood up and kicked a chair in a violent surge of emotion then walked back to the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror after the outburst. She studied her face then listened to the water drip from the faucet. Cortez rinsed her hands then went into the bedroom. She opened the first door and smelled perfume as she entered the room.

The covers of the two beds were light blue. The room had the touch and smell of a woman and it was cleaner than the rest of the house. There was a wooden dresser with four drawers separating the two beds and he noticed candle next to a hairbrush.

A poster of a long forgotten Bahamian regatta decorated the opposite wall next to the closet. The smell of jasmine grew stronger as she approached the rolling blind at the head of the bed. Imelda heard the sound of crushing gravel. A car was parking at the front of the house.

Imelda went back into the living room, sat down on the couch and waited for them to come inside. Cortez asked them calmly if they had seen the twins when they came inside. She lied by telling them they did not pick up their checks last Friday. Ana sat down on the couch while Tara gave her account of the last time they saw the twins from the kitchen.

"They stopped by the house on Friday afternoon and dropped off some burgers before they went to Miami for the weekend," Tara said.

"Where are they were staying?" Imelda asked her.

"It was some hotel. I think it was the Palacio," Tara answered sounding sure of herself.

"Did they say when they might be back?"

"They said they would only stay a few days and then they were coming home. I think they said they would be back on Thursday," Tara said confidently from the kitchen.

She had the information she needed. Imelda reached into her purse and pulled out a large wad of folded hundred dollar bills then counted off ten bills with quick flicks of her finger then handed the money to Ana.

"Here's some money," Imelda said offering it to Tara. They were both surprised at her generosity. The two rarely had extra cash to spend since they were smuggled into the country from Cuba by the twins on Imelda's boat.

"Get the cable hooked up. Try to fix up the place and

clean the floor as best you can. I want to put some carpeting in here soon to make it look nicer. I will call your boss and let her know you are doing some work for me for the rest of the day. I will see about getting a computer and fixing up the back room if you do a good job," Imelda said.

Ana took the money and smiled. Cortez felt it was necessary to lecture them. She was once poor like them and felt somewhat responsible for them since they were part of her extended family. Imelda also wanted to impart some of her wisdom on the subject of The Homeland.

"Always remember someone is watching and informants are everywhere. The flag of The Homeland is soaked in the blood of innocent and those that speak out against the government," Imelda explained.

She handed Ana a business card from her purse. Ana accepted it and examined the lettering. There was a picture of a copper penny on the top left corner. The card read "Red Cent Laundry Services" in bold gold letters. The bottom right of the card had her name and a home telephone number.

A security company screened all her calls. Each caller initiated a software program in a mainframe computer. All call numbers linked to a database maintained by the National Surveillance Center. Imelda Cortez was an asset for The Homeland and all of her phone conversations were classified "Top Secret".

Cortez knew plenty about the power of cash all too well. She spent two years working with soldiers in Central America. Her generous bribes to the regional military forces allowed her to import tons of coca paste from Central America. There it was transformed into cocaine. She coordinated the logistical particulars with Major Flak from the Octagon His pilots flew the junk into The Homeland on military aircraft. Chase McGregor was her handler in Miami on behalf of the Major.

His job was to collect the predetermined amount every

month. McGregor followed his orders, but he had his doubts about the arrangement. He did not like being a participant in the shadier side of law enforcement or being relegated to being a bagman for the military brass.

Their dirty deal had two advantages for Imelda Cortez. She did not have to worry about being arrested and she had unlimited access to the latest technology and intelligence. Cortez soon learned she could listen to every word over any telephone and track a person on the ground by satellites from space whenever they wanted. They could even bounce communication signals off the moon to listening posts all over the world.

One word spoken over the airways or typed into a computer could trigger any number of sinister forces into action. The 21rst century had a new currency. It was the countless gigabytes of computer data on nearly every person on the planet.

It did not take Imelda long to realize how The Homeland was organized for the benefit of the corporate shareholders. The system reminded her of bees working diligently in a hive. The drones of the world united in a single cause for the benefit of the few or the one. She knew that money made the world spin and the bankers were in charge of the speed of the rotations.

Cortez watched them claim the world and everything in it seemingly indifferent to the suffering of humanity and the degradation of the world's ecosystems. A lone person was almost powerless against the corporations because the bankers bought and sold governments every day.

She also realized one woman with a dream could start a revolution anywhere they damn well pleased. All it took someone with guts, vision, guns and plenty of ammunition. The right person could capture the hearts and minds of an entire population and convince others to share a vision contradicting the global agenda fed to the public by the fascist shareholders and their monster media corporations.

Ana and Tara rose from their chairs and walked her to the door. Imelda kissed them both on the cheek and walked outside.

“I'll stop by in a few days. Tell them to call me right away,” Imelda said.

She called the laundry and told the woman in charge that the girls were doing some work for her and they would not be returning. Then she called information for the number of the Motel Palacio. .Cortez drove out of the yard onto the dirt road leading back to the marina and then continued to the traffic light before turning onto Highway 1.

Five minutes later she pulled into the parking lot of Captain Cluck's Deluxe Fried Chicken stand and dialed the Hotel Palacio. The front desk clerk at the motel in Miami answered after three rings. Cortez asked for the Lopez room. The clerk connected him and phone rang twice before Rico Lopez picked it up.

“Rico is that you?” She asked him.

“Yeah who is this?” Rico replied as if the call interrupted him while he was doing something important.

Cortez felt like reaching through the phone and strangling him.

“The next time you decide to skip town with my money let me know. I have a business to run. Now get your ass back here. I have a job for you,” Imelda insisted.

“I deposited the money here this morning,” Rico said trying to defend himself but Imelda was insistent.

“I like my deposits dropped on Friday in Key West. Get back here with my van. I need it for the dirty laundry,” Imelda demanded. She hung up the phone relieved that there was a simple explanation for the missing money, but there were other serious matters to attend to requiring the skills of a killer.

CHAPTER 5

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The Margarita County Jail was once a base for soldiers stationed on Key West. The walls around the place made it look more like a military garrison. The forces of nature constantly besieged the rocks at the base of the wall facing the ocean. The only storm to get the better of it was the Great Hurricane of 1866. Part of the roof of the torture chamber came crashing down and there were several casualties.

Most of the prisoners would agree the place was haunted. Some inmates reported they had seen the ghosts of dead soldiers walking the parade grounds under the light of the full moon and more than one guard reported hearing the sounds of drums and cannon fire in the middle of the night.

Wade walked across the parking lot to the elevator and rode up to the second floor. He found himself looking at a large room with a black and white linoleum floor that reminded him of a chessboard. There were six plastic chairs with metal frames bolted into it. Across the floor was another room separated by bulletproof glass.

He could see three men in uniform at a series of computers. There was a trustee in an orange jump suit pushing dust around with a large broom to his right. The floor reflected a contorted orange image of the convict doing the sweeping.

Wade proceeded towards the control room. There was a metal counter with a drop box and a visitor's log attached to a clipboard. A black plastic pen dangled from a chain at the top of the clipboard. He picked the pen up like countless visitors before him then signed his name, destination and the time. Then he placed it back inside the tray and closed the top of the drop box.

A short and stocky officer heard the slamming of the

metal and walked over to retrieve the contents of the drop box. He picked up the clipboard and read the writing. Wade was focusing down past the silver badge on his chest. He was writing.

"Where are you going?" The man asked.

"The Programs Department," Wade replied.

The officer turned around and walked over to a phone behind the glass and a made call. He set the phone down after a few moments.

"Go to the door on the left of the elevator," The guard instructed.

"Thanks for your help," Wade responded.

Wade walked across the floor then looked through a rectangular window. He saw the face of a woman. There was a buzzing sound and the door opened. He noticed there were several offices against the far wall. The middle of the room consisted of individual desks separated from the others by partitions creating several cubicles.

He thought Tina Keene was a real woman in every sense of the word when he met her. Her uniform shirt stretched the fabric taut around her bust line. Wade looked into her brown eyes and smelled the scent of her perfume. His first impression was a good one.

"Mr. Wade?" Miss Keene inquired politely. The woman extended her hand and smiled. She made the introduction with enough charm to twinkle a star.

"My name is Tina Keene. We can talk in my office just follow me," Tina suggested. Wade shook her hand briefly then watched her hips sway as she led him though the office.

Miss Keene was wearing a white polyester shirt, dark blue pants and black walking shoes. He could tell she took her job seriously. There was a hint of confidence in her step as she led him pass the other desks. The scent of her perfume lingered behind her as she moved across the room.

They arrived at her office several moments later. She

sat down and requested he do the same. Van Wade pulled up a wooden chair and looked at the candy dish in front of him. There were a few pieces of candy corn left over from Halloween in the dish.

"I think it's best if I start by telling you what do here. My position is that of Director of the Programs Department. We administer all programs for the inmates. We have Bible study, Spanish classes, gender sensitivity, verbal judo and High School diploma preparation classes. The inmates fill out requests to the programs department and send them up here.

One of your jobs is to make sure the request goes to the right location. We try to keep the inmates busy in some way. Many are on work release or have other jobs in the facility," Miss Keene explained.

Van Wade was staring at the candy on the desk, listening to the information with mild interest. Miss Keene spoke with a Southern accent. Van Wade's concentration wavered as he wondered if she was from Alabama or Arkansas. Wade thought she was nothing less than charming.

"We are contracted with the local school district to help inmates get their High School diplomas. The Homeland administers the diploma test twice a year. We usually graduate between ten and fifteen students a cycle. You will be doing the initial interviews and educational assessments on each student to find out how smart they are. We have a classroom downstairs with eight computers and a blackboard. That is where you will be doing the majority of your teaching.

Remember that only those students found to have at least a ninth grade education can be admitted into the diploma program. They need have a long enough sentence to complete the twelve-week program. Do you have any questions up to this point?" Miss Keene asked.

Wade shifted in his chair. His lower back was hurting. It

was an old injury from his college days. He could not stand or sit very long without intense pain radiating downward through the sciatic nerve in the back of his right leg. Wade leaned forward in the chair to take the weight off his spine this action had the effect of reducing the pain.

"That sounds simple enough," Wade replied.

"You will also have to get some training." Miss Keene added. Nobody told Wade anything about training by those over at the school district.

"What kind of training?" Wade asked.

"There is a class on emergency procedures, security and contraband rules. Our class also reviews what not to do when you are working here. I think there is a segment on hurricanes. I do not mean the mixed drink, although the comparison might seem appropriate since both can really mess someone up. This is the tropics and from June through November the island could disappear at any given moment in a raging storm," Miss Keene explained.

"You are kidding me," Wade said doubting what she said. He pictured a random prisoner in shredded clothes, lashed to a palm tree with jungle vines, screaming at the top of his lungs to the howling wind and stinging rain while hanging on for dear life as the island began flooding.

"Eighty percent of Key West went under four feet of water during Hurricane Wilhelmina. The power was out for a month and the National Guard had to restore order. It was a real disaster. Be thankful you were not here. Can you believe something was eating up all the raccoons on Big Pine Key?" Miss Keene said surprised with the fact.

"So what happens if a hurricane really does come?" Wade asked.

"We have a holding pen up the road. We send them up the highway on school buses after the warning has been issued," Miss Keene explained.

"Isn't that complicated?" Wade asked doubting the reasoning behind the process. He imagined a busload of

criminals heading up U.S.1 like a bunch of kids off to summer camp only to arrive at a cold concrete shelter with barbed wire around it. Wade pictured the soldiers there holding M-16's doubling as gatekeepers for an unruly mob in orange scrubs and flip-flops carrying around brown paper bags with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with apples and bananas inside.

Tina Keene had to get to the property room. She eased her behind out of the chair. Her position involved multitasking in several departments around the facility. Like everyone else there she was over worked and under paid.

"Let me show you to your desk. I'll introduce you around to the sheriff, drug counselors and the chaplain some other time," Miss Keene said as if she was in a hurry to get somewhere else.

They both made their way out of the office. It was fifteen feet away from hers. Wade noticed the chair reserved for him and was glad it was made of leather and had wheels. The two went past the fingerprint section, then the guards briefing room in the direction of the cafeteria.

Van Wade stopped at a display case on the wall in the hallway. It was a collection of confiscated weapons from the prisoners. The reality of where he would be working was not a pleasant one thinking the place was all business.

One mistake here could mean curtains then over the edge into the canyon of silent infinity. That fact made Wade feel uneasy. Miss Keene reached the cafeteria door then she noticed Wade was not behind her. She backed tracked and saw him gazing into the case. Keene walked back and stood beside him.

"People die in here don't they Miss Keene?" Wade asked her.in a serious tone. He turned around and faced her. Tina looked into his blue eyes. Dormant emotions inside her came alive within nearly overwhelming her.

"Yes Mr. Wade, Sometimes they do," She said with

some difficulty. Wade thought for a moment.

"It's sad isn't it? I wonder how people could lose control of their lives so easily," Wade said.

"I don't know. I just don't know," Keene answered.

Her eyes had a faraway look. The same one she got when she was alone touching herself in those private moments. Tina knew she had to get out of there fast. Miss Keene felt as if she was falling. She sighed and reflexively put up her guard.

"I don't mean to run off, but I have to go." Tina said. She was determined to end the tour right away. Wade could feel a magnetic attraction between them stirring.

"No problem: I will see you later," Wade responded.

"Why don't you get settled in and I'll catch up to you after lunch. Look around the cell blocks and try to enroll some students after lunch. The cafeteria is down the hall on the left if you ever want coffee; go ahead and help yourself. They won't mind," Keene said.

"You can back out anytime you want if you are uncomfortable about the weapons back there. This place is not for everybody. It takes a certain kind of person to deal with criminals all the time." Wade paused for a moment unsure if the job was right for him.

"Let's just see how it goes for the first few weeks," Wade replied.

Keene returned to her office then went down the stairwell leading down to the cells. Her mind was racing and her hands were trembling. She was not sure what had just happened. The inside of her thighs felt as if they were jump started with sexual energy.

Wade went over to his desk and sat down. He had an hour and a half before lunch. He began looking through the drawers of the desk to pass the time so it would appear he looked busy. They made a sharp squeaking sound as he opened them. The tracks needed oil. He saw old student records along with pencils, paperclips and other office

materials.

It seemed that whoever was there before him was in a hurry to leave. The inside of his desk was a mess. Wade organized the desk into a tidy work area. He thought about decorating it with some pictures like the secretaries working in Devin's office and decided it might not be appropriate.

Wade felt the pains of hunger. He got up from his desk and walked over to the cafeteria for his lunch break. The convict behind the stainless steel counter serving the food was holding a large metal serving spoon.

The stuffed green peppers in the stainless steel serving tray looked like giant olives crammed with dog food. Wade was unimpressed with the presentation. He ate a chef salad instead with Italian dressing and a slice of pie for desert along with a carton of milk. He looked at the picture on the carton. The missing kid was from Nebraska last seen at a pizza parlor in the nation's capital. Wade looked at the picture wondering how many kids disappear every year.

He finished his meal and turned his attention to three people walked into the cafeteria. They moved together as if invisible tethers of purpose held them in check. It was Sheriff Baylor with the head administrator David Gills and the prison attorney Marty Styles.

They slid their plastic trays down the metal track and began collecting plates of food. The trio decided to eat at one of the wooden tables on the veranda. Wade thought their closeness was rather odd. They behaved as if they were participants in an ongoing criminal conspiracy.

Van Wade rose from his chair then walked over to a cart next to a trash can and broke down his tray by separating the plates from the silverware. He put the plates into their designated piles and tossed the utensils into a soapy basin.

He took out the student applications from his top drawer when he got back to his desk and put them under his arm then headed downstairs to the cells. The officer in the

control booth observed his progress. Wade pressed a small button that magnetically unlocked the entrance when he reached the metal door he opened it by pulling on the brass handle.

CHAPTER 6

The first thing Van Wade noticed were the steel tables bolted to the floor. The lower tier had several cells in a row along two of the walls. There was a set of stairs across the room leading to the upper level and another door leading out to the exercise area. The shower and toilet area was in one corner separated by a partition.

The inmates incarcerated there received a term of one year or less from the Margarita County Circuit Court. The more serious offenders went to Prison # 29 near the capital. The worst criminals went to Fort Lookout located on a desolate island fifty miles away in the middle of the ocean.

Most prisoners were in their cells. Some were sitting at the steel tables playing board games or reading. Three were looking at a television bolted to a metal post a few feet from the guard's desk. All the prisoners wore orange overalls except for the trustees they wore light blue.

Wade felt uneasy as he made his way to the guard's desk. There he saw one reading the paper. Wade walked towards him until he was standing directly in front of him. The guard was reading an article in the paper about a local scandal involving the school district. One of the teachers stole more than a quarter of a million and bragged about the fact to the wrong person.

"Can I talk to you for a second?" Wade asked him.

The guard's name was Sanford. He had seen teachers come and go. Most were not a problem for him as long as they left him alone. He set his paper down annoyed by the interruption.

"Who are you?" Sanford asked expecting an immediate response. Wade looked him in the eyes then smiled.

"My name is Wade. I'd like to sign some people for my high school diploma class starting next week," Wade said.

“Go right ahead,” Sanford replied.

Tony Laredo looked over at him wondering what he wanted. He inspected all visitors to the unit. Initially he thought Wade was a cop or an attorney, since he did not recognize him. Visitors usually meant bad news for someone and that upset the equilibrium of his domain. He was the leader of crew of cutthroats on the outside known as the Lighthouse Gang. Wade projected his voice across the cell block. His shouting bounced against the walls. The voice sounded like he was shouting inside a mausoleum.

“My name is Mr. Wade. I am starting a diploma program here at the jail. I will be in the unit for one hour taking applications. You can sign up if you have a sentence of four months or more. You also need to have completed the 9th grade. Please don‘t waste my time if you are not serious about your education,”

A few of the inmates watched him walked over to one of the bolted tables and sit down. Wade pulled out an application and waited. Three minutes went by before an inmate finally walked over sitting in the seat across from him. The convict looked at him. His name was Anton Horne. He was serving six months for marijuana possession.

Horne was another dropout from the local public school system. He left school to help his mom pay the rent and support his sister. The miniscule wages at the jobs around Key West facilitated his decision to sell pot. He sold his product to the tourists wandering the streets. Business was booming. People on vacation loved to get high and ride the propane train around town. Most of the passengers would eventually mosey on over to the aquarium to gawk at the colorful fish behind the glass.

Horne and his lawyer would have beaten the charges, but he happened to be within a thousand feet of a school. He had a hundred bucks and a half an ounce of grass when the cops arrested him. The prosecutor wanted to get him for

intent to distribute, but his public defender convinced Max Coles to go easy on him. Since it was his first offense.

"I want to sign up to get a diploma," Horne said.

"What's your name?" Wade asked politely.

"Anton Horne," He said.

"How much time left on your sentence?" Wade asked him.

"I have been in two weeks. Judge gave me six months and told me to graduate," Horne explained.

"How far did you get in High School?" Wade asked.

"I finished the eleventh grade," Horne said, answering the question as if completing the grade was a major accomplishment.

"I had to quit and help my family. I liked school. I was on the football team. I wore number twelve. I got that number because I got twelve touchdowns my first year on the Varsity," Horne said. Wade considered the boast briefly.

"Well done. Too bad you did not stick it out. Maybe you could have got a scholarship. Why do you want to get your diploma?" Wade asked him all too ready to take notes.

"Judge says I got to," Horne replied.

"What do you say?"

"I don't know. I guess I want something to do. I only been here a couple of weeks and I am bored. Time moves faster when I stay busy,"

"Can you read?"

"Yeah I can read. I read the sports page when I can get a newspaper. I like reading the sports. They talk about what teams are winning and what happens to athletes. Stuff like that. Sometimes I read the crime report. Today I read about a cop who was snorting cocaine and freaking with hoes down at Peek and Boo's strip club," Horne described the events as if it was a normal occurrence.

Wade considered what he said for a few moments. Then gave him his homework.

"I want you to write me a two page essay on why you

think cops should not sleep with strippers," Wade suggested.

"You want me to write a paper on that?" Horne asked surprised.

"Sure: Is that a problem?"

Van Wade was challenging him. He knew the subject was important because of the widespread incidence of venereal diseases on the island. He was evaluating Horne's attitude and paying particular attention to his reaction when given the assignment. This would be a short assignment if the student had the wrong attitude.

"I'll be back next week. The essay is a good review for something you will see later on a test," Wade said.

Horne smiled. A mouthful of straight white teeth revealed themselves.

"I'm cool with that," Horne said. He could write the paper with no problems. One time he wrote a fancy letter to a girl asking if she would go out with him. He could get his cell mate Waldo to write it for a couple of deserts if he did not have any time. He was the jailhouse lawyer. Waldo had achieved a respectable level of notoriety while enjoying a constant supply of canteen treats from the inmates he helped.

Nearly all of the prisoners looked up to him. Waldo spent most of his time researching in the law library. The inmates that could read had limited access to the legal materials necessary to pursue cases on their own. Waldo always made a point of this fact whenever they brought him before a Judge.

Anton got up and walked away. Tony Laredo gave him a dirty look from across the room. Wade wrote his name on one of the application forms. He would get more biographical information from him during the follow up interview.

The next inmate was Booker Bennett. He was serving time on a burglary charge. Booker could barely read, but he

was a whiz with numbers and had an uncanny memory. The school system passed him from one grade to the next primarily because of his ability to regurgitate information. He made more money than most of his former teachers working for his Uncle‘s landscaping business after school. Wade looked over at Booker when he sat down then flipped the next page of the legal pad over to a fresh clean sheet.

“How’s it going?” Wade inquired.

The man in front of him was embarrassed because he could not read.

“I am alright. How do I get my diploma?” Booker asked impatiently.

“Well for starters you could introduce yourself,” Wade suggested.

“I’m Booker, but you can call me Double B,” Booker said responding .right away.

“How many years of school did you finish Booker?” Wade probed.

“I finished the 8th grade,” Booker said straightening up his back in the chair. Van Wade frowned.

“Sorry you have to have at least a ninth grade education to get with the program. I said that during the announcement. I will give your name to Kitty Nova from Readers in Motion. Maybe she can help you out. Rules are rules,” Wade added.

Booker stood up visibly upset. Wade wished he could do more for him. Kitty Nova could help him. Male convicts loved female visitors. He imagined Booker with a big smile on his face while flirting with his boss.

“Keep your chin up. You will be reading in no time,” Wade said seemingly making him a promise.

The next inmate walked over and sat down across from him. He appeared calm and collected, but his eyes revealed a hidden fear. The prisoner was Scooter Jones. He was a member of Tony Laredo's Lighthouse Gang and also an informant for the State Attorney’s Office. Wade could tell

he was agitated. Tony Laredo watched him intently from across the room.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” The man asked.

“Who are you?” Wade asked almost defensively. He felt annoyed with his approach, feeling this inmate was not there to discuss his class. He did not want to seem rude so he motioned for him to sit.

“How can I get my diploma?” The man asked him.

“What's your name?” Wade inquired.

“Jones; but my friends call me Scooter.”

“Stop by the Readers in Motion office and ask for a lady named Kitty Nova. She might be able to fix your problem.” Wade said, giving the advice without hesitation. Jones leaned forward closing the distance.

“I’m in big trouble man. They are going to kill me. I mean it. They will kill me. Can you dig? Here take this,” Jones insisted putting a paperback on the table.

Sanford the guard got up from his chair heading towards them now. He was standing behind Scooter barking orders a few seconds later.

“Get back to your cell Scooter,” Sanford demanded.

Jones looked like a stray dog about to get castrated. The guard grabbed him by his arm pulling him away from the table.

“Get off of me,” Scooter yelled yanking his arm away while giving Sanford a dirty look. The guard then turned his attention towards Wade.

“I think it’s time for you to leave. Chow is on the way. I would not listen to Scooter. He has a history of mental health issues. One day the cops found him naked up in a tree pissing in the wind,” Sanford said.

“He was just asking for a place to get a diploma after his release. He did not do anything wrong,” Wade said while getting up from the table. He picked up the paperback holding it in his hand with the folder with the applications and the legal pad.

Laredo watched Sanford escort the teacher to the exit. Wade paused for a moment at the bookcase by the door and considered putting the book back. The buzzer sounded and the door opened slightly. Van Wade pushed it open and walked down the hall and up the stairs.

Sanford sat back down at his desk, picked up the phone and placed a call upstairs and passed on the details of the incident between Jones and Van Wade to the legal department. Marty Styles told Sanford he would take care of everything else.

Wade went back upstairs and returned to his desk. He was not in a good mood when he got there. Sanford had rattled his cage. The guard convinced him that something might be very wrong with Scooter Jones.

He picked up the paperback. It was titled *Conch Chowder*. Someone scribbled a large Roman numeral at the top right corner next to the price in red reminding him of the letter X. Wade began reading the reviews on the back cover. The first one was from the Florida Keys Straight Shooter.

"*CONCH CHOWDER"* is a gripping tale of good versus evil. A thriller packed with plenty of mystery. The book has more thrills than a roller coaster ride in a hurricane." The next review was by a critic from New England. "The author is a breath of fresh air that can tempt any reader with breezes of anticipation. He surfs the wave of pop culture fiction like no other author today." The last caption one was from the Boca Raton Beacon. It was simple and to the point. "*CONCH CHOWDER* like the soup has everything," The review proclaimed.

Van Wade looked down at the phone in front of him. He picked it up and called Kitty Nova. The phone on the other end rang several times before the answering machine clicked into action. Wade cringed as he listened to her squeaky voice on the machine.

"Hi this is Kitty Nova. I am out of the office right now.

Please leave a message and I will get back to you as soon as I can," The message said.

Wade heard a click followed by a tone. He waited until the tone stopped then left his message.

"Kitty this is Van Wade out at the jail. I have to leave town for a couple of days due to an unexpected personal situation. I will call you when I get back. I like working with Tina Keene and the whole situation there at the city jail. Thanks for all the support," Wade said.

He was playing the odds knowing something was sideways with Scooter yet he did not want to jump to any conclusions until he found out his problem. He wanted everything to appear normal as he collected more information.

A red light blinked on the office phone belonging to Marty Styles when Wade dialed the call to Kitty Nova. The jail's attorney picked up the phone. He listened to every word carefully then hung up. Styles sat for a moment in his black leather chair looking at the picture of his boat. He reached into his coat pocket and took out a cellular phone then pushed a button that dialed Imelda Cortez.

She was in the hot tub soaking her bones and did not feel like answering when it rang. She was just about to go upstairs for another workout with Marissa followed by a shower and then a siesta. Styles spoke into his cell phone and left his message while his blood pressure was rising.

"Are you there? Pick up. We might have a problem with somebody over here at the jail. Seems he gave a copy of a book to him for some reason. This morning he was talking to Scooter and I think he told him something. You might have some of your men pay him a visit to see what is brewing. Call me over at your convenience when it is done," Marty Styles said before hanging up the phone.

Van Wade had a gut feeling something was not right after he called. He sensed someone else was listening in on his message. He felt like he did before a fight. He felt as if

his stomach got twisted in a knot from the inside out.

Wade left his desk and walked to the exit then slid the passkey into the metal groove. The lock opened with the familiar buzzing sound and he pushed the steel door open. Wade did not feel like waiting for the elevator. He went down the fire escape stairs instead then pushed the metal door opening into the parking area on the ground floor.

He walked over to his truck and got inside and just sat there for a few minutes wondering if he should go to the beach and clear his head. The first day on the job and some inmate tells him he is going to die. Wade felt uneasy as he drove back to his apartment. What he needed to do was relax. He changed into a pair of swimming trunks and grabbed a towel.

CHAPTER 7

The breeze coming in from the water rustled the palm fronds lining the parking lot on the beach. Wade could hear the sound of seagulls laughing as he stepped up from the sand onto the wooden pier. The gulls on the edge cawed at him mockingly as they took flight one after another.

Van Wade looked down the pier and saw a man in shorts fishing. He walked towards him noticing his head was covered by a green hat weaved from palm fronds stopping when he was ten feet away from him.

Wade was about to turn around and go back down the pier when the man greeted him. Wade guessed he was seventy years old. His face had wrinkles and he was leaning slightly against the rail because of a crooked spine.

"Good Morning," The old man said.

"Having any luck?" Wade asked.

"Little bit," The stranger replied.

The man was staring at the horizon with his fishing pole in his hand. His finger was on the line waiting for the tug letting him know a fish had the bait. Most days of the last year passed with him in the same position.

"Are you catching anything?" Wade inquired further.

"Not yet," The man answered.

Wade thought the man was deliberately being mysterious. The fisherman took his eyes from the horizon turning his head towards him.

"What is on your mind?" The fisherman wondered.

"Just crap from work," Wade replied.

"What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a teacher." Wade replied.

"Do you like your job?"

"The pay is alright," Wade admitted.

"That is not what I asked you."

"I guess it is alright," Wade said.

The angler thought he had a nibble and pulled the tip of the rod up quickly to set the hook. The fish took the bait and was already gone. The man knew it and left it there just the same.

“Do you like baseball?” The fisherman asked.

“Doesn't everybody?” Wade answered.

“I asked you that because I want to use it in a comparison. You will probably get the meaning of what I have to say next if you like baseball.” The stranger explained.

“Okay; you win. I like baseball,” Wade said wanting him to get to the point.

“Then you will understand what I am about to say. The Great Spirit has a sense of humor so he throws people the curve ball. There are other pitches that come along in life but many people struggle with the curve,” The fisherman said.

“What do you mean?” Wade asked.

“We never know how much time we have left in this world. Any living thing can die at any given moment. Look around you. All of the Great Spirit’s creatures are constantly battling in this game we call life. I compare life to baseball because it is The Homeland’s favorite pastime. Everybody leaves the stadium when their time expires.

A person does not go to first base when the curve ball finally comes along. They go directly home and the game is over. Everybody could save themselves plenty of trouble if they did not worry when the curve is coming. Rather they should simply enjoy life. The curve is coming whether they are ready for it or not,” The fisherman said.

“That sounds reasonable to me,” Wade answered.

“Let’s talk about your job,” The man suggested.

“What about it?”

“There are two types of people in this world Van. There are Players and there are the Spectators. It is that simple. The problem most people have is that they do not know

they have a choice between playing the role of one or the other. Do you love what you do Van?"

"You mean for a living?" Wade asked in an attempt to clarify the question.

"Yes for a living and whatever time is left," The man said.

"I hardly ever get to do what I want," Wade admitted.

The old man reeled in the line then set his rod down. Then he pulled a yellow and white container out of the water by the cord, opened the lid, got out a live shrimp holding it in his hand. Wade watched him put the hook through the back of the shrimp.

"Now the shrimp is feeling the curve," He said smiling.

"I see what you mean," Wade replied.

The old man looked far out to sea through the polarized lenses sun glasses. The color of the lens was that majestic indigo blue seen only by anglers and pilots far away from land.

"It is easy to love yourself if you love what you do with time. You are a Player not a Spectator if you can do that, Most people in the game we call life do not get that chance. Their circumstances will not allow it. Therefore; it is hard for them to feel good about their place in this big show we call life," The old man explained.

"What makes the fish bite?" Wade asked. He did not feel like talking about the philosophy of life just then so he tried changing the subject.

"You love asking questions don't you?" The man asked.

"Sorry about that," Wade said apologizing.

"The question is whether or not you can handle the answers. The fish bite at certain times. It depends on the moon, tides, winds, currents and some say even the barometric pressure," The man said sounding scientific.

"That sounds complicated," Wade admitted.

"It isn't really. After a while fishing becomes second nature. The secret to catching fish is not to want it. They

come around faster if you don't care if you get them one way or another," The old man explained. He smiled as he scanned the surface of the water. The old man was looking for a tarpon or snook feeding near the surface.

"What's your name?" The fisherman asked.

"My name is Van," Wade said pausing for a moment before answering.

"The curve ball confuses nearly everybody Van. Our time on earth is like a baseball game. We never know how many innings are left. The game is not over until the last curve. This puts the squeeze on all of us making the inevitable pitch much more important.

This is why it is crucial that we must love all we can in this game of life. We must play the game strategically. The only way to do that is to know about the other types of players in the game. Life is about relationships, everybody has to deal with other people some time or another whether they like it or not.

The most important thing is to stay true to your heart while embracing the love that is inside. This love is the Great Spirit. The Great Spirit is love and a part of that spirit is within every one of us. There is no guarantee it will stay there. It only stays with the Players and leaves the Spectators. Allow me to explain it another way.

The way in which a person acts towards their fellow human beings is similar to the pitches a baseball pitcher throws. There are twelve types of pitches. The important ones are the sinker, knuckle, slider, screwball, fastball, changeup and the curve.

I am not saying that a person's pitch is set in stone. Any person can change their lifestyle and act a different way and sometimes they do. People can mix up their pitches, but people generally stick to their old habits and the characteristics associated with their own particular pitch.

A Sinker is a person that down on himself all the time. They bring the people around them down with them. They

exist in a depressed state and always seem to be in a slump. They are overwhelmed with the game of life and the immensity of it all. Much like a person struggling to get out of quick sand. They are in the game but are preoccupied with themselves because the big show is just too much for them. They have love in their hearts but it is overshadowed by their negativity in all aspects of their existence.

Then you have the Knuckleheads. They face the struggle of life bravely, but get frustrated because they don't know what to do. They have no strategy for living. You never know what a Knucklehead will do. They are mad about their place in the world .They do what is needed to live up to the expectations of others, but they are always unpredictable. Knuckleheads just cannot get their act together in any consistent way despite how hard they try.

Beware of the Sliders living in the shadows. They have lost all their respect for the game of life a long time ago. They are only allowed to watch the game from the dark places in the stands because the Great Spirit has all but given up on them. Their fate rests with the foul ball, flying bat and the curve, while they figure things out enough to save themselves.

Sliders are not nice people as a rule. The middle finger comes over the top of the ball when a pitcher throws a slider. Sliders give the middle finger to everybody as a matter of habit. They are selfish by nature and experts in collecting material possessions. The umpire removes them from the field so they do not steal the equipment necessary to play the game," The man explained.

"What about the screw ball?" Wade inquired genuinely interested.

"The Screws can't be explained within the usual categories of pitches. This is intentional on their part. It is how they draw attention to themselves. Their behavior is outrageous and they confound nearly everybody with their perverted antics. People cannot help but to notice them.

Their weakness is that they crave physical attention and immediate gratification more than anything else. Many mistreated people become Screws in the end. Never underestimate a Screw. They can confuse almost anybody at will. A person is vulnerable to their point of view once that happens. You will behave like them too once you think like they do. Then it is all over.

Screws wander the stands trying to get fans out of the stands luring them away to dark places where they gorge themselves with immediate gratifications of the flesh. There are other types of Screws. Each indulging in any number of perversions requiring physical contact. They embrace the sins of the flesh like there is no tomorrow.

This brings me to the fastball. The Great Spirit loves the fast. Nearly everybody in the mainstream of life pitches the fastball. They are always busy doing things and there are never enough hours in the day for them to get those things done.

The fast are the heart and soul of the Homeland. They never slow down because they have to make money. They work hard yet their money is spent on the ones the love. They are selfless. Most of the Fast have families. They have to live fast because they have loved ones that depend on them each and every day.

The fastball is the most important pitch because it takes a tremendous amount of energy. The pitch is rooted in self-sacrifice. A person must be selfless to have any hope of becoming a Change Up. The two go together like peanut butter and jelly. You cannot become a Change Up without command of the first. There is no other way.

The Fast transform into Change Ups when the Great Spirit deems them worthy enough. Then their life becomes a magical journey of love and dedication to their family. That person becomes overwhelmed with joy in their hearts. They love life to the fullest and cherish their family like never before when they become Change Ups.

They are truly the all-stars of this game we call life. Think about how happy a rookie is the day they get into the major leagues for the first time. Then take that feeling to the infinite power. Change Ups conquer everything with their joy," The fisherman explained.

"So what is a Spit Baller?" Wade asked.

"I almost forgot about them. They are the practical jokers of this world. They do not mean any harm. The Great Spirit put them here to remind itself of their particular game via the umpires. Everybody thinks the Spits are cheaters. They are not. Spits are just misunderstood.

You have to remember that The Great Spirit is very busy keeping the schedule of all the other games in the universe. The umpires report to the Great Spirit on a weekly basis. The Spits remind the umpire not to lose interest in their particular game.

The Spits are a built in safety feature to remind the umpire to pay attention so they won't forget to pass the score to the Great Spirit. The players would break the rules whenever they feel like it and then the umpires would not give a damn one way or another. The end result would be catastrophic," The fisherman explained.

"I understand what you are saying, but these types of pitches are just labels? You cannot categorize people because they behave like a baseball pitch. Some people will get offended. They will hate you for saying that kind of stuff," Wade said understanding the gist of what the old man was saying. Yet he was unsure of the validity of it all.

"Who will I offend?" The old man retorted.

"The Screws won't like it. That's for sure," Wade replied.

"Ninety nine percent of the people out there won't have a problem with my views on people, life or baseball. All baseballs have labels in between seams in case you have not noticed. I am here to observe the game and I call the pitches like I see them. People act a certain way in life.

That is their preferred pitch. If a small percentage wants to be Screws; then let them. Do not expect me to grease them up or build a monument for them.

The problem with the Screws is they are out to throw the game into chaos with their perversions. They are nothing but trouble makers bucking the system. They would have gender benders on the teams with the men if they had it their way just to get attention. They are worse than tossing a monkey wrench into a finely tuned transmission!

There is nothing wrong with the game of baseball. So don't let them try to fix it. Only the Change Ups have the right to change the rules because any changes they might make would be for the love of the game and not their own self-serving interests. The Screws are selfish existing at the expense of everyone else. They are misguided and need to take their medicine," The man said.

"What about money? People in the game have to get paid. Am I right? "Wade asked.

"Do they? Money to the Spectators is like fishing to me. We both cannot get enough of it. Let me break it down for you. Players stick to the intangibles like love, truth, justice and liberty. These core beliefs promote a lifestyle that benefits the collective and compassion for the people around them.

Look at the world around you. Right now the Spectators are running the show. Do not worry Van. The Great Spirit is coming back to fix things soon and the Screws are not going to like what is coming," The old man explained.

"How do you make money?" Wade asked getting frustrated. The man seemed to get philosophical every time he asked a question requiring a simple answer.

"Think about it," The stranger suggested.

"You sell fish?"

"I throw a pitch," He insisted.

"What kind of pitch?" Wade inquired.

“The kind of pitch some people don’t like to hear. It is one I did not mention. It is called the fork ball. I give my opinion honestly without reservations in the spirit of freedom of speech. Think of my opinion as a piece steak with a fork stuck in it resting on a plate. You don’t have to chew on it but it is hard for a person not to look at it. You decide if they want to give me money for it or not. I share my pitch with them whether they want to listen or not.

My job is to present the past time of life. I stick it with a fork, hold it up and show it so everybody can see it clearly. The Homeland’s favorite game is baseball. Like I said; the game is similar to life.”

“You are just like the commentators up in the booth.” Wade exclaimed.

“Forget about it. Just be nice to everyone, not just the Change Ups, but the Screws too. Love them and pray for them then maybe one day they will see the error in their ways and get better,”

Van Wade walked back down the pier. He thought the old man was cool yet his face seemed familiar for some reason. The sea gulls took flight once more from the wooden railing, laughing as they spread their wings floating away in the breeze.

CHAPTER 8

Crab's van was waiting for Scooter in the parking lot on the day of his release from incarceration. He strutted over to the driver's side shielding his face from the sun. Crab was waiting for him inside. Scooter instantly became nervous when he saw his red curly hair, bandana, ivory skin and long beard

Crab looked like a pirate should. His red beard hair dangled room his chin in five uneven strands with a tiny knot on each end. His arms were littered with tattoos. The blue-green ink fading as fast as the memories of his life and times. His most noticeable of which was of a poisonous jellyfish named a Portuguese Man of War on the inside of his left forearm.

There were others including a vintage schooner and a skull with crossed sabers underneath. He had an eighteen-carat gold dagger earring hanging from his left ear that caught the sun's rays as he held the steering wheel with his three fingers. Jones knocked on the tinted window. Crab rolled it down.

"Going somewhere Scooter?" Crab asked him.

"I'm going to the beach to try and get laid. Then I might go somewhere for a cold one, How about you?"

"Not much just cruising around," He said.

"You want to smoke some crack?" Crab asked. He was testing Scooter wondering if he had the courage to blast some pop rocks in the parking lot.

"That probably is not a great idea. I could use a ride though. Can you drop me off at the beach?" Jones asked him.

"Get in; I have to talk to you anyhow," Crab insisted in the nicest way possible without revealing his true motives behind the invitation.

"What about?"

"Just get in," Crab reiterated.

Scooter walked slowly over to the passenger door. Crab opened it and Scooter climbed inside taking his place next to him. There was a cooler below him to his left in the space between the two seats. Crab did not waste any time getting to the point.

"So who is this guy Van Wade?"

"Just some teacher at the jail. He was signing up people to get into his class," Jones explained.

"So why were you talking to him?" He asked knowing something was up. Imelda called him earlier in the day and told him what to say. His instructions were to observe his reaction when he questioned him.

"I wanted to see about getting my diploma," Jones explained nervously.

"What did he say?" Crab asked.

"He said some lady could help me." Jones answered.

"What lady?" Crab inquired.

"Kitty something…Nova I think," Jones said.

Crab thought he was kidding. He wanted to make Kitty Nova and her friend Nelly Flynn honorary members of the crew. The two were enthusiastic employees of Peek & Boo's Escort Service. They got nice and cozy last Saturday at the Swell Motel.

"What does a pirate need with a diploma? Forget about it. The boys are waiting down for us at the Seagull Saloon. They want to buy you a couple of rounds to celebrate your release. I hope you feel up to it," Crab said pretending not to know her.

"I was kind of hoping to get laid before I get drunk. That way I will not have to wait," Jones explained. Crab started the engine then eased the van out of the parking lot.

"Stop whining. We are going to get high then find you a date. I want you to meet this girl named Vanilla. She is a real bobcat in the sack. Grab a cold brew from the cooler,"

Crab suggested.

The Brown Recluse had already made up her mind about Scooter Jones after the call from Styles. Crab was not sure if Jones was a snitch. Imelda told him to pressure him by peppering him with questions. She needed to know what else Scooter said to the teacher during the meeting at the jail.

Scooter was the main link in the contraband distribution process. He worked in the laundry and got the cocaine to leader of the gang. Laredo suspected there was a rat in the pipeline. He thought it might be Scooter because he received such a light sentence.

Crab and Scooter did not say much to each other on the way to the bar. Scooter was staring out the window, enjoying the view of the ocean. It was a pleasant change from the endless red brick and gray paint at the jail. He felt the load of his incarceration lifting from his shoulders. The daily grind there was almost more than he could bear. He hated the place vowing to himself he would never return when he got out.

Crab parked on a side street behind the Seagull Saloon. They walked inside the bar and went towards the far side of the room. The Crew was already waiting around two picnic tables joined together. There were four pitchers of beer on the table. Two them were empty and the other two were almost finished. The sound of conversation and occasional laughter filled the air.

The pirates around the tables were already celebrating their latest prize. They captured a sailboat anchored inside the reef. The owner made the fatal mistake of not posting a watch. Two pirates rowed to their mooring and tied their rowboat to their anchor line. Then they climbed silently up the anchor line with knives in their mouths.

Crab saw the owner passed out on the floor in the arms of his girlfriend. The two had just finished smoking a gram and a half of hashish. Their bodies looked like two

discarded puppets on top of their crumpled clothes on the floor.

The booty from the sailing vessel *Miss Connie* included a case of Haitian rum, cash, assorted jewelry, a shotgun, two pistols and five kilos of hashish. The only thing the interlopers argued about was the Quaker parrot. The bird went to Leroy after the pirates all drew for the high card from a deck.

That night was still fresh in Crab's mind. They went below deck as silent as phantoms loitering around in a cemetery. The parrot sensed the intrusion and began reciting meaningless jargon in a raspy voice. The bird's vocabulary was as limited as it was comical. It preened his feathers while the pirates tied the couple up with fishing leader line.

The owners were originally from St. Louis Missouri. They hauled the boat to Savanna, Georgia then a friend drove their truck to a relative's house. They sailed down the Atlantic coast arriving in Key West three days ago. They planned to visit some friends on the island then sail back within a week.

Leroy leaned back in his chair with the parrot on his shoulder. The bird's real name was Argo. Leroy changed it to Mango. He was holding a bag of sunflower seeds feeding the parrot a seed every couple of minutes. The bird had a contented look on his face as it looked down at the empty shells scattered on the floor.

Leroy was fondly recalling the depravities of the evening while the other two-crew members were preoccupied with guzzling beers. Crab and Scooter walked over to the table. Crab saw the bird and smiled.

"Jolly want a cracker?" He asked it. The parrot looked at him then nodded his head up and down before letting loose with an assorted of phrases.

"Stars and Stripes-Urp" The bird mimicked. It whistled twice afterwards then there was a barrage of repeating

clicking sound followed by more raspy words.

"Red, white and blue-Urp." The parrot said while flapping its wings. The bird then flew off Leroy's shoulder landing on the floor. "Black and blue. Black and blue," The parrot repeated.

The bird stared at Leroy who was extending his middle finger near the belly. It stepped onto the instant perch. Leroy lifted it up and put it back on his shoulder. Scooter was already laughing from the previous patriotic comments.

The plan was already in motion and everybody knew about it except for him. Scooter had to walk the plank that night. The crew would get him drunk to the point of passing out then deliver him to Carlos.

Slammer looked up at Crab while wiping the suds off his face with the top of his forearm. He was a bull of a man with thick shoulders and a bald head. His tattoos told the world his story of the salt life and the sea. There was a tattoo of a Bull Shark on his forearm in loving memory of a fourteen footer that almost snuffed him out while he was spear fishing in the Pacific off Oregon.

He was a natural brawler that loved to fight that used to be one of the top bare-knuckle fighters in the underground circuit and was the chosen enforcer for the rest of the crew. Slammer took care of anyone that needed their attitude adjusted by violence. He carried a hammer in a custom pocket sewn into his jacket. He might also carry his favorite bowie knife or a Derringer pistol at any given time.

Scooter had skills too. He got his name because he stole mopeds as a teenager, eventually getting his own business as a locksmith. That was way before he developed a crack addiction. Then he sold his work truck and all his tools. The cost of his habit put him in the poorhouse.

He carried his glass pipe everywhere back then. It sucked the life out of him like a slow leak in an inner tube. The crack smoke took him on countless journeys to distant

galaxies and places he never dreamed existed in his own mind. He always came crashing back down to the planet surface like an elephant without a parachute after the high evaporated.

One day he bought a crack rock from an undercover cop and got himself arrested. The cops took him to jail when he could not talk his way out of it. It was the best thing that ever happened to him. He would have died soon if he was still on the street. Scooter got six months and mandatory enrollment in addiction and anger management classes.

A distant relative was the wife of the Director of the Violent Crimes Unit. That was only reason he did not go to State prison. He turned into a snitch for the County Prosecutor. They had no problem turning him. He promised him all the coke he could sniff in exchange for information.

Leroy Grafton's life was nothing less than promiscuous. He seduced all manner of women whenever his urges required it. He spent his youth in a coastal town in South Carolina and grew up in a strict environment. His father taught him that the only way to get respect was to be able to do something that most folks cannot. That was why he became a mechanic.

He was eighteen in 1970 when the Army drafted him and sent him to a country he never heard of to kill people he did not know. He went AWOL in 1972 and that was the last the Army ever heard about him .He hiked into Thailand and smuggled himself back in the Homeland by bribing the Captain of a freighter.

Leroy was a natural when it came to engines, but his real passion was Scuba diving. After he returned home. He spent the rest of his twenties diving the countless shipwrecks searching for artifacts off the Carolina coast. He joined the gang by chance when one of Imelda's outboards broke down while he was on vacation in Key West. Cortez paid him good money to fix it with no

questions asked.

His mechanical ability was impressive, but it was the size of his manhood that kept her attention. He slept with her the night they met. Imelda liquored him up to thank him for fixing her boat. He could have made an honest living as a marine mechanic, but he thought piracy took more guts. He loved the action and the freedom that came with the job.

Crab liked to grow plants especially the illegal kind. He was originally from the west coast somewhere in the Emerald Triangle. He made a living there selling reefer to the tourists and was one of the first to utilize hydroponics. He refined his hydroponics technique by initially growing hot peppers and tomatoes. He then applied the knowledge to cultivating marijuana. The problem was he loved to smoke his crop. Crab got out of the business after he got a tip off from a dirty cop who told him his plot was going to be raided. That was when he left town.

Stitches also had a history of drug dependency issues. He was a former paramedic that developed a morphine habit on the job. It later cost him his career in the life saving department. He was tall and slender yet his looks were deceiving. He was as equal an expert in street medicine as he was with a knife in his hands.

Stitches acquired his medical skills while stationed in the Philippines as a Corpsman in the Navy. He studied knife and stick fighting in his spare time when he was not on the base. He could cut you up and sew the pieces back together again blindfolded. Stitches made sure the crew had the necessary prescriptions for any medical problem when he was not administering first aid.

His unique skills were constantly in demand due to the hearty lifestyle of the crew. He spent his spare time bartering for pills on the black market and honing his surgical skills on road kill when he could find it.

He wanted to be a surgeon when he was young, but his family could not afford the cost of medical school. Stitches

had a problem with classroom learning anyway. He hated it. Stitches figured a person should practice medicine in the field without the restrictions of a clinical setting.

Tony Laredo was their weapons man. He was once a soldier, who saw combat in two wars in a special operations unit. The military taught him everything they thought he should know about guns and explosives. He rented his skills to the highest bidder when he was finished spilling blood for their causes.

His first job was as a mercenary in Central America. That was where he met The Brown Recluse. It was not long before he was doing security work protecting her shipments of coca paste from Central America into The Homeland.

There were six people in the Lighthouse Gang soon to be five. The members were Laredo, Stitches, Crab, Slammer, Leroy and Scooter. The twins were Imelda's nephews and worked at Imelda's laundry service performing odd jobs at her discretion.

Carlos the assassin was her ace in the hole. Only Imelda, the Lopez twins and Laredo knew of his existence. Carlos Cortez was a complete sociopath. The Brown Recluse was the only person that could keep his blood lust in check. She sold his talents as an assassin to the military and organized crime at premium prices.

The six members had something in common. An eight escudo Spanish gold coin around their necks from a shipwreck out on the reef. The coins were part of a consignment of gold for laborers repairing a lighthouse a century and a half ago that went down in a violent storm on White Knuckle Reef.

Leroy and Crab found the coins while diving near the base of the structure beneath the lighthouse. Leroy was enticing a lobster from his den, but the hole was too small for his hand. He started enlarging the hole with the knife when the water turned purple. He had inadvertently stabbed into a pocket of indigo mixed with tar.

Leroy continued digging until he hit something metal. He pulled his knife out and there was a gold coin stuck to the end of the blade. There were over three hundred and fifty coins recovered that day and all of them were stained with the purple dye.

He called The Brown Recluse on his cell phone telling her all about it. The Lopez twins arrived with her lobster boat along with a hookah rig and more diving equipment. They sent down an air hose to clear away the sand at the base of the coral head.

Leroy uncovered a pocket of tar called "pitch" once used for sealing leaks on wooden ships. It was stained purple because it had mixed with a popular dye at the time called indigo. Leroy and Slammer gave one coin to each member of the crew and kept the rest for themselves. Imelda advised him to find out as much as he could about the ship. The next day Leroy did some reading at the library.

He learned the gold came from a lost schooner owned by the Continental Trading Company called *Corinthian*. The ship disembarked from Philadelphia in 1848 with a cargo of construction materials destined for Key West by way of Freeport. The first part of the cargo was unloaded successfully in the Bahamas along with half of the consignment of coins. That portion of gold was meant to pay for repairs of a lighthouse near Grand Bahama Island.

The rest of the coins were supposed to pay the salaries of workers in Key West repairing the lighthouse on White Knuckle Reef. There were other things on board including a cargo of opium intended to ease the bowels of prisoners in Key West sickened with dysentery during a cholera epidemic.

The night the coins were discovered Crab, Cortez and Leroy fell under the spell of the long dead Captain of the ship. The three had the same nightmare that night of a ship caught in a gale. The spirit of a dead man appeared on deck

and issued them stern warning. The apparition told him never to betray him or their souls would belong to him forever. The ghost demanded they returned his gold to the lighthouse. Then for some strange reason it demanded anchor chains.

The next day Crab and Leroy returned the coins, hiding them in the tower. He was tightening the bolts to the brass panel covering the motor when he heard the groaning of a damned soul followed by the sound of chains dragging on the spiral staircase below.

Crab and Leroy got out of there as fast as they could nearly wrecking their boat on the reef in their haste. The chains they brought were piled near the keeper's quarters on the loading dock of lighthouse like discarded metal snakes.

A few days later the gold mysteriously vanished. Imelda was so terrified she lost the coins that she began buying any gold she could find to appease the spirit.

Imelda told Carlos to track down whoever was responsible and to bring her their head back in a burlap sack. Carlos had his own ideas about the identity of the thief. Then she heard that a local pawn shop owner was selling gold coins so she began planning a daring crime in the weeks to follow.

Scooter and Crab joined Leroy the other crew members at the table. The barmaid walked over with another pitcher of beer and more cups setting them down.

“Hey Crab tell us about Kitty “Super” Nova, Vanilla Flynn and their little briefcase of kinky surprises. Did you give the lasses some bones to hide?” Slammer asked dying to hear the story. Crab smiled.

“We sure as hell did not pay them for their virtues. We sentenced the lasses to hard labor in the bedroom. It was our solemn duty as pirates of the Caribbean,” He said in jest.

The table erupted in laughter. Crab poured himself a beer then pounded his fist on the table. Scooter grabbed the

pitcher and filled his cup. Slammer knew he was the rat and he could not wait to gut him like a fish. He put his arm around his head at the neck with mock affection.

"How does it feel to be out Scooter?" Slammer asked as he began squeezing. Scooter's ears and face were turning pink as he applied the pressure.

Stitches glanced over at Scooter making sure he was looking somewhere else then he looked over towards Slammer. He nodded his head then Stitches poured the contents of a vial into his beer. The chemical dissolved quickly while Scooter was preoccupied with the headlock.

"Who's your buddy Scooter?" Slammer asked him while driving his two knuckles into his scalp from his other hand just to be cruel. He eased the pressure slightly then let him go. Scooter sat up in his chair.

"What is your problem? I didn't do anything," He said infuriated.

"Shut up you sissy or I won't buy you a lap dance tonight," Slammer replied. Then he laughed in his face. Scooter stood up from the table about to walk out the door.

"I'm out of here," He said defiantly to everybody.

"Sit down and drink your beer," Crab ordered.

"Hello!" The parrot squawked as if on cue.

The bird on Leroy's shoulder was reacting to the noise level. Leroy gave him another sunflower seed from the paper bag. The bird split the shell and then dug out the seed. It maneuvered his tail around his shoulder then squirted a stream of green and white crap onto the floor then it looked up at the ceiling as if nothing happened.

"Take it easy Scooter. What is up with Laredo? How is he doing? Does he need anything?" Slammer asked him. Scooter gave him a dirty look.

"Not right now. But he told me to tell everyone to drink beers and recite the creed for him."

Everybody at the table raised their cups and downed their beers. Then they all slammed their cups on the table.

Scooter never noticed the additive drinking his cup without hesitation. Leroy yelled over to the barmaid for ten shots of rum while Mango the parrot began beating his wings to stretch them out.

The bird was getting fidgety with the noise level and so was the barmaid. The commotion and the crumpling of the plastic cups scared the bird. The parrot on Leroy‘s shoulder began shifting feet as if doing a two- step dance. It was anxious to return to the safety of his cage.

The barmaid heard the call for shots and began filling shot glasses with grain alcohol. She poured up six then another pitcher from the tap and brought the drinks over to the table. Crab reached into his pocket and pulled out his lighter along with a hundred dollar bill for the barmaid. Then he banged his fists on the table. The loudness of the pounding got their attention.

“Everybody shut up,” Crab demanded. All the pirates went silent. Crab put a shot glass in front of each person. Then Crab began reciting the creed of the Lighthouse Crew. Everybody stood up and looked downwards at the floor in a mournful repose.

“I speak now to consecrate our bonds with the sea. Drink this fire for your bellies my hearties and catch them bullets with your bones. Let go of the rail when ye die for we all must rest at the bottom of Davey Jones,” Crab recited the words as if they would be his last.

He lit the alcohol in the glass and poured it down his gullet fueling a fire deep in his soul. Each member of the crew recited the words then drank. Scooter repeated the words then gulped his shot. He turned and looked at Slammer then began feeling dizzy as the drug in his beer entered his bloodstream. Jones lost his coordination and stumbled a few seconds later. Then everything was spinning. Scooter hit the floor and Slammer kicked him in the ribs to see if he was unconscious. Then he ripped the gold coin and chain from around his neck.

CHAPTER 9

The Barracuda Bar on No Name Key is one the least advertised watering holes in the Florida Keys. The locals hope to keep it that way. There is a television, jukebox, pool table and free popcorn for those who do not mind the sea salt. Nobody mentions who owns the place or the five-foot barracuda nailed to the plaque above the entrance. Some joker put a cigar in the mouth right between the teeth and left it there.

Two officers from the Marine Patrol walked inside and leaned against the bar rail. They ordered a couple of beers then sat down on the bar stools. Pablo Hernandez and Jimmy Sweeney had dark tans from years of patrolling the turquoise waters off the coast. They were finished work for the day spending the last hour buried in paperwork back at station.

They were good cops. Jimmy was in his early fifties, had a wife and a couple of kids. He managed to stay married through the years. His oldest Alex was seventeen and played football at the local high school. His younger son Tony was fourteen and more introverted. He preferred to spend his spare time on the computer or working out at the dojo.

Sweeney sent him to karate classes when he was eleven to learn self-defense in case of trouble from the wannabe gangsters at school. His wife Denise was against the idea. Jimmy thought it might toughen him up and teach him self-confidence. He thought the kids the same age might pick on him because of his quiet and gentle nature. That was three years ago.

He was a red belt now smashing wooden boards. Jimmy hoped the boy never lost his temper. One kid from the tenth grade grabbed him a while back when he was a brown belt.

Tony did a wrist lock on the bully and took him to the ground using a finishing technique known as an arm bar.

A teacher ran over and pulled him away before he leaned into it. Tony would have snapped the bully's arm like a twig. His boy was a real ass kicker and Jimmy prayed he had not helped create a monster. Denise realized that anything was better than Tony getting beat up when Sweeney explained to his wife what happened.

Pablo was the proverbial single male. He began his career with the Highway Patrol, but then grew tired of the endless driving. He transferred over to the Marine Patrol when he looked at their boats. He thought they were cool. Hernandez convinced himself the work part would be nothing more than routine inquires for boat licenses, registrations.

Pablo truly loved his life on the water now. He did not have any kids only a long list of former lovers. Pablo thought marriage did not jibe with his playboy persona. He liked variety in the bedroom and was always looking for his next conquest. He was currently sexually active with two women. Both were waitresses from the same restaurant. The girls were roommates who did not mind sharing.

One liked men in uniforms and the other had security issues after a boyfriend roughed her up. Pablo entertained the thought of having a threesome on his birthday. He hired an escort named Kitty Nova from Boo's Escort Service instead. He planned to take her out to Mister Sims Chinese restaurant after work.

Hernandez and Sweeney had a bad day on the water. They responded to a call to meet the Coast Guard over at the lighthouse on White Knuckle Reef. They watched the recovery of a body. Some poor stiff got himself chained to the top of the lighthouse. They saw an inflatable boat tied to the loading dock when they arrived on scene.

A person in a blue uniform came bolting out of the keeper's quarters like a jackrabbit on amphetamines.

Sweeney thought he had to throw up. Pablo guessed he wanted to relieve himself. Turns out they both were wrong.

The Coast Guard sent a guy named Tucker up to get a closer look at the corpse. He did not make it to the tower. He was there less than a minute before he ran back down after seeing a ghost. He was catatonic in the front of the zodiac shaking like a leaf.

The rest of the crew went up the steps with guns drawn. They did not see any ghost. What they did find was Scooter Jones chained to the tower above the keeper's quarters. It took them hours to retrieve the corpse since they did not have a pair of bolt cutters to remove all the chains.

Scooter's shoulders were out of their sockets and his skin was covered in a gritty layer of sea salt, coloring the corpse a ghastly gray. The killer left his signature mark. The rough outline of the letter X in the chest directly over the heart.

All the Coast Guard knew was that it belonged to a male about thirty-five years old. They would initiate the formal investigation and stick around for the gathering of evidence. Pablo and Sweeney loitered on the premises of curiosity. They had never been to a murder scene on the high seas. The whole situation was something of a novelty to them.

A second Coast Guard vessel eventually showed up with bolt cutters and removed the body. They did a quick set of prints on the scene then faxed them out to headquarters and got a match right away.

The body belonged to Scooter Jones. He was a former inmate at the city jail down in Key West. His body was loaded onto the second vessel and brought to the Coast Guard base. Then the body was transferred to an ambulance waiting on the pier while Tucker was driven to the base infirmary.

Jimmy took a swig of beer, savoring the taste, while Pablo was checking out the backside of the barmaid leaning

over reaching into the cooler for a beer.

"That whole thing on the reef was messed up. What kind of person could do that to someone else?" Sweeney asked him. He did not care if Pablo answered him. He was looking into the foam at the bottom of his mug figuring it was time for a refill.

Pablo at that moment was preoccupied with the notion of breeding still looking at the shanks of the barmaid. He turned away and looked up at Sweeney when he remembered she was sharing her crease with one of the guards from the road prison.

"Who the hell cares? You know the deal. It never changes down here. You know that. Forget about it. Give me a buck to put it in the jukebox. All I got is a ten and I am saving that for the next round," Pablo said negating the trauma of the afternoon's events.

Jimmy stood up reaching deep into his pocket pulling out two crumbled dollar bills and handed them to Pablo. He took them then walked over to the jukebox and began hitting buttons. Officer Hernandez played the same four songs every time he went into the Barracuda Bar.

Pablo came back from the jukebox and ordered two more beers with his ten. The bartender brought them two frosty mugs of beer after about a minute passed. Pablo paid her and smiled. Sweeney grabbed the mug and took a sip.

"I heard the Coast Guard already went to the Feds. The Violent Crimes Unit has the case now. Captain says he was some kind of informant for their office in Miami. Just did a stretch in Key West for possession. Someone somewhere screwed up," Jimmy said.

He began looking at the dartboard on the far wall deciding whether he wanted to throw when the first song of the Pablo's hit parade begun. Music cascaded from the jukebox filling the bar with a harmony of sounds. The other customers in the bar hardly noticed. They were staring at someone fighting a tarpon on a fishing show stuffing their

faces with free popcorn.

"I guess the Feds lost their snitch. They always seem to get what's coming. What's with the letter X carved into his chest?" Pablo asked hoping for a sensible answer.

"Hell if I know. Whoever did it was really pissed sending a serious message to some unknown third party. Maybe Jones is some kind of damn treasure map," Sweeney joked. Pablo's first song was ending. The next one was one Sweeney liked. It was about a girl named Brandy in love with a sailor that loved the sea more than he did her.

"I guess VCU will send their man down here to dig around. Maybe he can help develop a psych profile," Jimmy said. Pablo rolled his eyes.

"Who needs a profile? Whoever did this likes alphabet soup. No big deal. What I mean is; who chains a guy to a lighthouse with an X carved into him?" Pablo posed the question hoping Sweeney would say something sensible. He laughed realizing he had said something funny. Jimmy got the joke about the soup and chuckled. It helped him cope with the gory memory of it all. There was a few seconds of silence until Sweeney spoke up again.

"Something really scared that Coast Guard guy. I never seen anyone run so fast except maybe the time you got caught banging my neighbors wife. I wonder what it was," Sweeney said.

Pablo did not answer him. He was thinking about his date later that night with Kitty Nova. He did not like it when work interfered with his social life. He was used to doing whatever he wanted, when he felt like, except when he was out on the water.

"That's just great. I was hoping to get a quickie down at that trailer park. She is off on Mondays," Pablo explained. Sweeney finished his beer and set the mug down on the bar.

"You can poke what's her name on your own time after you do the meet and greet. I have to get out of here. Alex

has a game tonight and Denise wants to talk to me about something. Leave her the tip." He said .then wiped the suds from his face with his forearm and got up to leave.

Pablo's parade of musical hits was half over when the cops stood up. He took out some change and slapped it on the counter then he winked at the bartender before heading for the door. The bartender saw the change and wondered why the two cops were so cheap.

The heat was on them like a blanket when they walked outside. The sound of the peat rocks crumbling beneath Pablo's feet reminded him of the sound of scrunching snow.

"I got a date with an escort tonight. Do not tell anyone. I am treating myself since my birthday is next week. Occasionally I like to spice it up a little. I think her name is Kitty. Word around the station is she's a real cougar between the sheets," Pablo said almost proud of himself. Sweeney was not impressed.

"You know Pablo one of these days that cock of yours is going to really make your balls sweat," Sweeney warned.

"It would not be the first time." Pablo replied as if he did not give a damn about any future consequences of his numerous sexual liaisons.

"Jimmy could you drop me off back at my place? She does not come over until about eight. I am taking her to Mr. Sims Chinese restaurant before I look at the goods on her menu. Maybe I will feed her duck before I let her gnaw on my egg roll," Pablo said jokingly.

Sweeney laughed as he sat down and started the car. The drive to Pablo's house took a couple of minutes since it was only a few blocks away. Pablo's dog Champ was already barking from behind the metal fence when the vehicle rolled into the yard.

"Thanks for the ride Jimmy. See you later," Pablo said.

"Have a good weekend Pablo and remember to wear your raincoat on your date," Sweeney said. Pablo laughed again then walked up to the front gate.

The dog waiting for him was a mutt whose breed had yet to be determined. Pablo got the animal after it was confiscated during a drug raid on a crack house from a professional basketball player. The suspect told the cops they bought the dog from a football player. It was missing an ear and had a lazy eye from several battles for his life. The dog was stressed out when he first got him. Pablo won it over by spoiling him with chew toys and doggie treats on a continual basis.

The dog began wagging his tail when he opened the gate. Pablo walked over to the water faucet a few feet away turned on the hose and filled up his water bowl. Champ lapped up the water from the bowl, licked his chops shaking the water off from his face.

The dog looked up at him with big brown eyes. The same one's that floored him every time. He reached down, took his ripped ear in his hand and began rubbing it.

"Who is a good boy?" Pablo asked the dog. Champ looked up at him with tired brown eyes, made a whining sound then licked his hand.

CHAPTER 10

The Director of the Violent Crimes Unit was Chase McGregor. He was a dedicated cop with a taste for fine tequila and big game fishing spending most of weekends trolling the coastal waters off Miami in his boat.

There was never a doubt among his subordinates that he was on the level. He did not take bribes and he made sure his field agents got what they needed. He thought it was not a good idea to trust anyone. That meant the people with guns and badges supposedly sworn to uphold the law since they were unpredictable.

Chase thought criminals were more predictable, knowing he could count on them to do the wrong thing most of the time. Cops on the other hand could turn on a dirty dime. He had seen it happen far too often. He believed the police were the ones that needed watching because they had the force of law behind them.

McGregor backed his detectives, although some of his subordinates did not like him. Maybe it was because he always spoke his mind. Chase had sharp elbows. That meant he spoke his mind and upset people who did not like hearing about their faults in direct terms without the sugar coating.

The Director had several pending investigations on his mahogany desk that required his immediate attention. One of his cases was on the island of Key West. His wife's cousin had problems. Chase initially wanted to stay out of it, but his wife insisted he do something because Scooter Jones was her nephew. That meant he was family whether he like it or not.

McGregor called Judge Ryan and Max Coles the prosecutor after the Scooter Jones was arrested a few months ago. The three agreed that Jones would become a

confidential informant in exchange for a lighter sentence. The Judge could have given him more time, but McGregor interceded because Jones was distant relative on his wife's side of the family. Scooter promised to provide information about what went on during his stay at the jail in exchange for a lighter sentence.

He felt it was his solemn duty to throw the full weight of the Violent Crimes Unit into action after Judge Ryan told him Scooter was dead. It had to appear that he wanted to find his killer to appease his wife, since he was indirectly responsible for his death.

The Judge passed him the last bit of information Jones gave the State Prosecutor before his demise. He reported that the laundry service was bringing coke into the jail and the pipeline was open. He told him the man with his hand on the faucet was a lawyer named Marty Styles.

He was making time with an escort named Kitty Nova. She posed as a wannabe saint doing charity work for non-profit corporation for the underprivileged while moonlighting as a call girl for an outfit called Peek and Boo‘ s Escort Service. The business catered to anybody in the mood for sexual action with cash to spend.

This was no surprise for the Director. Businesses like that rose and fell all the time in the Florida Keys. The island's economy revolved around tourism and drug money since the late 1970's. There were always strip clubs and the people getting private dances could be anybody from the island's power elite.

McGregor cared little about the coke going into the jail. What he really wanted was the son of a bitch that chained Scooter Jones to the lighthouse like some ornament on a holiday tree. What Chase McGregor did not know was that Judge Ryan and District Attorney Max Coles knew Kitty Nova and that she was a frequent outlet for their sexual urges.

What made Kitty so popular was that she carried a red

leather suitcase packed with a cornucopia of costumes, dildos, lubricants and flavored condoms. Her trademark was feeding her clients marsh mellows from a bag after sex. Her exploits and bedroom antics were the talk of the coconut telegraph in Key West.

The case file in front of him was gathering paper fast. There was a gruesome homicide yesterday with possible links to drug traffickers. Who knows what else would appear when the detectives started sniffing around. The Director was not totally in the dark. He knew a few pertinent facts relayed to him by the state prosecutor compliments of his relative Scooter, the now deceased snitch.

McGregor opened the file and viewed the contents through a pair of gold framed reading glasses. He rolled up the sleeves of his starched white shirt leaning forward in his chair. It made a crunching sound under his backside as he pondered where to begin.

He thought it was probably best if he started the investigation with the attorney down at the jail. McGregor summoned Travis Street by barking at him from across the office. He assigned the case to the eager detective and wanted him to stop by his office to pick up the case file right away.

Travis Street was his man for the job. He was sharp as the proverbial tack with a reputation for diligence and the tenacity of a badger. He also had a knack for finding the kind of direct evidence that stood up in court. Street had all the right qualities to propel him into one of those cushy desk jobs culminating in a serious pension.

McGregor knew Street grew up in Key West. He saved his tuition for law school by earning a living as a taxi driver. The Unit recruited him after he graduated with his law degree. McGregor learned he spoke fluent Spanish and a smattering of Russian. He would have *him* follow Marty Styles around to see what he was doing. Street was

attending to his emails on the computer when the Director called him.

"Get in here Street," He growled.

A person that just met Street would say he was of average height and medium build. He had blue eyes and black hair slicked back with mousse from a can. He dressed in professional attire, foregoing the famous name brand suits, for ones that could be dry cleaned easily. Today he was wearing gray pants and a white shirt with a dark blue blazer. A light blue silk accentuated his ensemble like an exclamation point.

He spent his free time cooking extravagant dishes for his dates or playing chess against the computer. He liked ice hockey and had season tickets to the Florida Panthers. His biggest problem was that he never had enough free time so it was hard for him to relax.

Street got up from the chair and walked briskly over to McGregor's office and knocked on the door. The Director waved him inside.

"Get in here Street," He barked again as if he was several feet away instead of right a few feet from him.

The detective responded like an eager soldier ready to receive his battle orders. McGregor's office smelled like cheap cologne and stale pizza. The detective glanced at the disorganized desk as the Director handed him the file. Street accepted it as readily if were a homework assignment in law school.

"Read this backwards and forwards. You are going to Key West to investigate a lawyer named Marty Styles. One of our informants got killed and we think he might know something. We suspect Styles is also part of a narcotics conspiracy involving the jail down there.

See what you can find out about him and his partner Chuck Flynn and whether or not the allegations have any merit. I am giving you the file of our informant down there. Give me a shout Monday morning and let me know where

we stand. I have already booked you on a flight to Key West. The ticket is in the file," McGregor explained.

Street took the case file and left the Director's office returning to his cubicle. The first page inside was a brief biographical sheet on Terrance "Scooter" Jones. It was the usual stuff. There was a list of his criminal offenses including reports from former probation officers, drug counselors and a psychologist. The detective soaked in the file like a sponge. He was finished reading the material in ten minutes.

He turned on the computer at his desk and ran a search on the law firm Styles and Flynn. He found their website and began reviewing the qualifications of the two partners. The firm had two offices. One was in the Bahamas and the other in Key West, specializing in business and tax law.

Marty Styles handled the business end in Key West, while his partner Chuck Flynn was the tax expert managing off-shore accounts in the Bahamas. Street imagined the firm set up shelters for people with money to hide and formed corporations for clients. Street examined their advertised list of their clients. One of them was the Key West Jail.

"Why would the jail need an expert in business law?" Street asked himself. He thought Styles & Flynn were probably hiding money for clients and taking advantage of the Bahamian banking laws although he was not sure how the jail figured into their operation.

Street examined the case from different angles while trying to think like a crook. One hour became two and soon it was time to leave the office. Street shut off his computer and made sure his desk was orderly before he left for the day. He took the elevator to the parking garage on the ground floor, found his car then drove home.

CHAPTER 11

Street caught the 6a.m. flight to Key West. Hernandez met him there and they had coffee together in the airport restaurant. There he brought him up to speed regarding jurisdictional matters and which Judge to call if he needed any extra help.

He settled into the motel by lunch time and waited for Styles and Kitty to check in. He called McGregor who gave him the most recent information from the wiretaps on Styles phone. He would be meeting Kitty Nova at 3pm at the Swell Motel. Street told him about Jones and the Director did not seem surprised.

Kitty Nova and Marty Styles rented a room at their favorite motel every other Wednesday. She was a part timer selling her carnal services via Peek and Boo's Escort Service. Today she was satisfying one of the founding partners of the law firm Styles & Flynn. They finished their hour of sex and were well into Kitty's customary bag of marsh mellows.

A comic book superhero outfit was lying in a heap on the floor along with a pair of silver tinsel pom-poms. Marty paid five hundred dollars for his roller coaster ride of thrills. Now Kitty was sitting on the side of bed feeding him marsh mellows as if she was pampering a pharaoh.

"I think my boyfriend suspects something," Kitty confessed.

Her leg was moving back and forth continuously from left to right. She had restless leg syndrome. The condition revealed itself when she used cocaine.

"Why do you say that?" Marty inquired

"He's been giving me funny looks."

"Has he said anything?

"Not yet. Maybe we should cool it," Nova suggested.

"I don't have a problem with that," Marty said agreeing with her. Kitty reached into a plastic bag for another marsh mellow.

"I want you to deposit some money for me," Kitty asked.

"How much?" Marty inquired.

"Make it an even $50,000. The check is in my purse. Can you take some of my friends out for a ride on your boat this weekend?" Kitty asked.

"I don't see why not," Styles said. Kitty was reaching into the bag for another marsh mellow. She put the bag down, opened her purse and took out her checkbook. She filled it out, tore the check from the pink leather holder and handed it to him. The check was for the Styles & Flynn law firm. The line at the bottom left had the words "legal fees" scribbled above it.

"How come building a house takes so long down there?" Kitty asked almost suspiciously. Styles replied instantaneously.

"Obtaining building permits in the Bahamas can be a lengthy process since you are a not a citizen. Things should be all sorted by the end of next month," Styles explained.

He lied to her. He was stealing her money and building the property in the Bahamas for himself while stringing her along. His firm handled the paperwork for Kitty Nova's two corporations. That second corporation's sole purpose was to siphon money from her first corporation.

Chuck Flynn's wife Nelly controlled all the grants coming into the public schools. She collaborated with Readers in Motion to administer grant programs for convicts who never graduated High School. Nova staffed the after school program with one employee from Readers in Motion. That lone employee was herself. She used the first corporation to secure the grant and then the second corporate account to bleed the first one dry.

It was not rocket science but a time-tested way to

embezzle money. Kitty used the Two Real Solutions account to bill Readers in Motion for all sorts of concocted expenses. She paid herself $75,000 to do nothing at all listing the accounting expense as “program administration fees” in the paperwork.

Kitty also utilized the public school credit card when she felt like shopping. Her last spree included jewelry, pornographic comic books as well as various costumes for her job at Peek & Boo’s Escort Service.

Nelly Flynn and Kitty Nova also shared a secret of a more personal nature. The two met once a month at the same motel. Kitty brought her red leather briefcase. It was her personal adult education kit. Inside there was plenty of dildos, lubricants and flavored condoms for her clients. Nelly never knew that underneath the plastic toys there was a diary. The cover was made out of Green Mamba snakeskin.

Nova always seemed to find variety and excitement in the privacy of the bedroom. She would never forget her latest escapade. Kitty, Nelly and their friend Holly Rodgers went to an orgy with several bankers in town for a seminar on the American Dream. The three got frisky with a baker’s dozen of bankers for a bit of role-playing dressed up as secretaries wearing nerdy glasses, high heels and push-up bras

Styles left the motel. He had to get back to the office and work out more details on her property file. He said goodbye to Kitty then walked out to his car in the parking lot. He opened the door, got inside and started the engine. Styles reached into his shirt pocket for his pack of smokes, took one out and lit it with the pop out lighter. Then he put in a CD. Classical music filled the inside of the car sounding like an orchestra as he took a long drag.

Marty cracked the window and laughed to himself when he thought about how stupid Kitty was trusting him with all that money. He thought of his partner Chuck Flynn

and his wife Nelly. Marty figured the couple stood in his way of the remaining money from the grant. He could solve his problem of retirement with that money.

Styles pondered the best way of getting rid of Kitty and the Flynn's. He thought of his friendship with Chuck. They had started the firm from nothing and getting rid of him was not going to be easy. Then Styles thought about David Gills and his wife Rosanne. He thought Gills was some kind of jerk off who did not know his place in life. Gills was running for Mayor and his wife Rosanne was bleeding Nova for campaign expenses.

This realization triggered feelings of anxiety. Styles knew that Nelly Flynn skimmed a hundred grand and was having her husband Chuck send it over to the Bahamas. He was not worried about that cash. Those funds were his once Chuck Flynn was gone. They were in the firm's joint account.

That left seventy- five grand for him to get his hands on after Kitty's check cleared. Mrs. Gills was already begging Kitty for cash. She was one of Dr. Devin's secretaries with Lorraine Lavaliere at the High School.

Nelly was signing checks along with Kitty on both accounts. Kitty, Rosanne and the Flynn's would all be a memory if his plan succeeded. He would have plenty of dough when he added the money from his jail scheme and what he saved over the years from Styles & Flynn.

Styles thought about Kitty, Nelly and Rosanne individually. He wondered if he could take one of them along for the ride. He was going to be sitting pretty when all this was over. There was going to be plenty of money for his retirement once they were all buried. Kitty would have to die because she knew too much. That left Mrs. Gills.

He knew Rosanne Gills liked him. She flirted with him at a party a couple of months ago. She was drunk that night and her husband was getting it on with one of the

transvestites from the jail. They were down in the basement humping against the dryer as it tossed around a load of his wife's clothes.

Marty toyed with the idea of having a go at each one individually or with all three at the same time. The idea of making them disappear appealed to him more.

"How can I get rid of them all at once and make it look like an accident?" He wondered to himself.

Then he got an idea. The best part of Marty's plan was that he did not have to get his hands bloody. The mosquitoes and the tropical sun would do the job for him. He would simply leave them stranded somewhere. The three would die from thirst, heat, or exposure within a few days like countless other castaways marooned in the Florida Keys over the centuries. He thought if they were found he could make up an excuse to hide his true intentions.

Street parked across the street two hours before and watched the pair enter the room. He waited in case one of them left the room to get ice. He walked over to the room when he felt confident they were settled. Street placed what looked like a piece of plastic tape on the plate glass window next to the door. It was a microphone designed to pick up sound vibrations hitting the glass.

Street returned to his car and listened to the sounds in the room through an earpiece. He suffered through their grunting waiting for the post ritual small talk. Street smiled when he heard Kitty talk about the check for fifty grand and the property in the Bahamas to Styles.

The investigation was going in an unexpected direction. He had stumbled onto a massive fraud scheme. The conversation between Styles and Kitty was evidence enough, that they were wiring stolen money out of Key West.

This meant there was an organized conspiracy to defraud. Styles laundered the money through his second

office in Freeport. He could only guess about what the Jones homicide had to do with it all.

He took a couple of rapid fire pictures next with the telephoto lens of his camera just as Styles walked out of the motel room. He watched him get into his car and drive away. Then he waited for Kitty to appear. It was not long before she left the room and went to the front desk to check out.

The detective exited the car and followed her to the front of the motel by the main parking lot. He waited by a planter with his camera pretending to be a tourist until she exited the motel. She went directly towards her vehicle, got inside, then drove away.

Street walked over to their room and removed the microphone tape on the window then unceremoniously picked the lock and entered the room. The room was orderly and smelled of cigarette smoke except for the crumbled pillows and the ruffled bed sheets. He saw used towels in the bathroom and water on the floor.

The detective checked the trash cans and then the desk. There was an empty plastic bag of marshmallows on the floor. The picture on the bag was of a light blue marsh mellow with a face, arms and legs in a stick figure motif carrying a royal scepter. The face of the marsh mellow man on the bag smiled back at him.

The ashtray had three menthol cigarette butts and a neon orange matchbook cover with the silhouette of two dancers and a pole. It was from Peek & Boo's Strip Club. He picked up the matchbook and put it in his pocket.

The detective noticed a small zip lock baggie on the ground while scanning the floor near the bed. It was about a square inch big with the imprint of the letter X stamped in green ink on the cover.

Street saw the white powdery residue in the inside. He collected the baggie with a pair of tweezers from his pocket and put it in an evidence envelope to send back to the lab

for analysis. Then he quietly closed the door and walked briskly back to his car and drove back to the hotel.

Street sat down at the desk and opened the file. He knew that the victim was Scooter Jones. He remembered McGregor told him the Jones body had an X cut into his chest. He took out the evidence envelope and examined the empty drug packet. He had a hunch the X on the packet matched the victim's chest.

Street would have to take a trip to the morgue to double check the assumption and get some close up pictures of the symbol for the case file. The detective had to make absolutely sure the symbol on Scooter's chest matched the one on the plastic bag. He also needed a copy of the coroner's report and the death certificate for the case file.

Nova's association with Styles & Flynn was another piece of the fragmented puzzle worth examining. He thought the prosecutor was going to love that piece of information. Their law firm was the final destination for the stolen cash.

Street was content with his progress for the day. He placed an order from room service rewarding himself with a steak and a double order of fries with two beers. He charged the meal to his expense account compliments Violent Crimes Unit via the taxpayers.

He worked through the evening, carefully studying everything he could find out about the firm on his computer. He searched for information on Chuck Flynn when he was finished he began researching Styles.

He also wanted to see Nova's financial records to check if he could establish any link by paper trail between Nova and Styles. Street considered interviewing him, but he did not want to alert him to his presence. He thought that when he learned the names of Marty's banks in the Bahamas and Nova's bank in Key West it would be simple to deduce where all of the missing money went.

He was surprised to learn that Flynn owned franchises

in Captain Cluck's Deluxe Fried Chicken. He had eaten there on more than one occasion and really liked their macaroni & cheese. His favorite was smashed potatoes and gravy.

He thought he was making progress with the case yet he thought there were still pieces to the puzzle missing. Street still wanted to review any physical evidence from the crime scene and go to the morgue to examine the body chained to the lighthouse. He doubted Styles or Nova had the capacity for such a heinous crime. That was the work of a complete psychopath.

He reminded himself to drive over to the base in the morning to get an incident report concerning the events at the lighthouse. He planned to visit the courthouse that afternoon and retrieve whatever records he could find regarding the victim.

Street turned off his computer and went to bed hoping the case would get more challenging. He dreamed of being trapped in traffic on one of the countless freeways in Miami except in this dream the cars around him looked like pieces of cornbread with oatmeal cookies for wheels.

The next morning Street woke up hungry. He went to a local pancake house for breakfast. There he ate a Denver omelet, drank two cups of coffee and read the paper. Then he went to the hospital and met with the medical examiner. His suspicions were confirmed when he saw the body. The symbol on the plastic matched the carving on the chest. He finally had a solid piece of physical evidence that linked the drug dealers to the body.

He took several pictures of Scooter's torso to make his conclusions obvious to a jury. Determining the exact cause of death presented another problem. It was likely a combination of several factors. The coroner's report revealed that Scooter Jones ingested alcohol, but there was also some kind of a depressant in his bloodstream.

These together could have stopped his breathing and led

to his death. He could also have died from the savage wounds on his chest. There were also ligature marks around the neck from the chains. This meant he could also have died from asphyxiation during the strangulation.

The visit to the jail after lunch was not as fruitful as he hoped. Their legal department coordinated staff investigations through Internal Affairs. The problem was that Marty Styles was in charge of the legal department and he was the suspect. Street sensed the woman from Internal Affairs would likely hinder any of his inquiries.

The questioning of the accountant David Gills might also prove difficult since he was an employee of the jail and running for mayor. He decided to wait until he had more evidence to materialize before pressing him or Marty Styles.

Hernandez at the Marine Patrol came through with a copy of the incident report. It mentioned that one of boat crew on scene went to the hospital for observation. His report was thorough enough, but Street thought he might learn something more from an interview.

He seemed nice enough when he met him at the airport. He considered taking a drive up to Big Pine Key substation to see Hernandez and Sweeney. Maybe he could get them to take him over to the lighthouse to see where it all went down thinking the change of scenery might give him a different point of view on the case.

Street disregarded the idea thinking the harsh environment would make collecting evidence next to impossible. He knew the Coast Guard had jurisdiction over all the lighthouses in the Country and he did not want to intrude into someone else's territory.

Street called the Commanding Officer of the base for more information. He learned that the soldier in question was on leave for personal reasons. The Commander also informed him regulations would not allow him to disclose details of any events on the high seas without a court order.

His last errand that day was the courthouse in Key West. The court records revealed additional trivial information on Jones. Nothing stood out; although the information did provide a colorful background to the case. The detective formed a rudimentary psychological profile of the killer after collating all the available data.

CHAPTER 12

You can find American Crocodiles in the Florida Keys if you look hard enough. Carlos Cortez knew about some living on a mangrove island half a mile east of Stock Island. He considered them his pets. Carlos had been feeding them fish guts for years. The named the one largest Tiny. It was almost nine feet long weighing at least 300 lbs.

The reptile had been partially responsible for a recent wave of pet disappearances. A columnist in one of the local papers incorrectly theorized that the culprit was probably a python that made it to Key West from the Everglades.

A veterinary pathologist would find four sets of dog tags if someone took the time to give Tiny an autopsy. One set belonged to a homeless veteran who got drunk and decided to swim across the harbour to Christmas Tree Island. The rest were the property of neighbourhood dogs that seemingly vanished in thin air.

Today the boat was loaded with fish scraps and a human chew toy. David Gills was lying on the stern handcuffed with electrical tape across his mouth. He was about to face the unavoidable consequences of his previous conversation with Imelda Cortez.

It was not his fault. His wife Rosanne was pressuring him to buy a three-inch gold gecko broach with emerald eyes and diamonds studded along the back. His sex life could get back to normal once she added it to her jewellery collection. That meant he would be getting back to having sex once a month. She had been holding out on him for two months already.

Despite her interest in expensive gemstone; Gills was worried his wife had not called him that morning. Rosanne was out on the boat with Marty Styles. He told him he would take her out fishing with Kitty Nova and Nelly Flynn then maybe go over to Monkey Bone Island for a few

beers.

Gills had things to do. He had to replace his spark plugs and get a new car battery. Carlos sneaked up on him from behind when he was in the garage and knocked him over the head with a blunt metal object. Then he tossed him in the back of the Red Cent laundry van as easily as a bag of dirty laundry.

Gills was lying on his side when he woke up. His head hurt and there was the taste blood in his mouth. He was tied up and looking at the blade of a machete. His view on the deck was limited from the angle of his head. What he could see was a dark blue milk crate filled with coconuts near the stern and pieces of husk on the deck near his face.

The boat decreased speed. Rico Lopez set down his machete and went towards the bow. He threw out the anchor and waited for it to take hold on the bottom. The boat soon held fast in the middle of a channel in front of a clump of dying mangroves surrounding a small spit of land dividing the channel.

Carlos wanted to snort cocaine before the grisly task of serving Tiny his lunch. He reached into his pockets and pulled out an amber colored vial. Carlos and his nephew Rico took turns sharing the golden spoon helping themselves to the white powder. Soon they felt the surging euphoric rush as the drug made contact with the mucous membranes lining their nasal cavities. Carlos was sincerely looking forward to the task.

"Are you ready Rico?" He asked.

"Si Senor," Rico replied.

Carlos did not see the beasts right away but he knew it would not be long before he did. Carlos was laughing as he opened a large plastic freezer bag stuffed with fish parts. Cortez began pushing the entrails and fish heads into Gills shirt and short pockets of the prisoner.

"You like fish gringo? Everybody likes fish. You should not have talked to Imelda like that. Now my monsters

disrespect you in the worst way," Carlos said mockingly.

Gills mumbled something into the tape. Rico went back to the stern with Carlos to get another bag of fish chum. After Carlos finished loading the pockets of his prisoner, they both began throwing the guts into the water at the base of the mangroves.

Carlos was feeling the effects from the coke when a crocodile appeared from beneath the surface. The rough hide and bumpy ridges on the dark back blended well with the surrounding vegetation. Soon several more assembled and began fighting over the scaly morsels. The scene reminded Carlos of a television documentary on one of those nature channels.

"Don't worry my friend. You will get gone nice and quick. We say a prayer for you to Tiny. He is the big one in the middle," Carlos said looking at Gills.

"Do you believe in God?" Carlos asked him. Carlos was an atheist convinced the Supreme Being would never allow so much suffering in the world or create monsters like those in front of him.

"Well maybe you will repent and save your soul before you meet your maker. You got about one minute to find your faith and say your prayers," Carlos told him.

He was laughing again as he tossed the head and spine of a grouper over the side. A few moments later things got real quiet as the two lifted Gills up by the top of his shirt. Gills heard the sound of his collar tearing as he they forced him over towards the starboard rail. Then the pair started shoving him over to the side of the boat.

Gills realized the seriousness of his situation then terror consumed his entire being. It came from a place far away entering into his awareness suddenly like an unwelcome intruder. His brown eyes opened wide and his pupils constricted as the adrenaline surged through his blood stream.

Gills began kicking as they hoisted him over the side.

The duct tape around his mouth muffled his cries for help. His body hit the green murky water with a splash. He felt his heart pumping hard under his ribs. Gills was taking rapid and breaths through his nose then his eyes began to burn from the salty water.

The reptiles moved instinctively towards the commotion. The water was only seven feet deep in the channel where Gills landed. He tried standing, but his feet could not reach the bottom. His efforts to stay afloat were futile. One of the crocodiles seized him from below. There was no scream just the sound of splashing on the surface.

Rico Lopez looked down at the water searching for any sign of Gills. All of a sudden a crocodile launched himself out of the water toward him as he leaned near the rail. The reptile narrowly missed grabbing him by the head. He heard the dull thud of jaws meeting and felt the rush of air next to his ears. Rico pulled his head and torso back at the last possible moment then fell backwards onto the deck.

He was visibly shaken when he went back towards the bow to haul up the anchor. He coiled the rope after lifting it out of the water then went over to Carlos at the wheel. Rico took out a small vial again and unscrewed the cap. He picked up the spoon dangling from the gold chain around his neck to collect the contents of the vial and then he snorted more of the white powder.

Multicolored stars appeared as if from a distant galaxy exploding in his mind's eye. He felt one with the universe for a fleeting moment then another wave of timeless euphoria swept over him. The pain of his life and entire being melted away. Rico felt the billions of neurons firing in his brain causing his body to tingle all over. He smiled as he picked up his machete. He thought of it as an old friend as he walked towards the stern and reached for another coconut from the milk crate. He picked one out and held it steady on the deck. The machete felt good in his hands**.**

CHAPTER 13

The Delilah was everything Marty Styles wanted in a boat. She was 32 feet long with twin 250 horsepower Mercury engines. It had a dark blue canvas top and a console equipped with all the latest electronic bells, whistles, gadgets and gizmos for any weekend warrior deeming themselves worthy of the high seas.

Styles loved his boat. He paid twenty five thousand for the hull and just under the same for the engines. It cruised nicely at forty-five knots when the throttle opened and could go much faster in a pinch. The Delilah was his baby and he took care of her as if she was part of the family.

He was anxious to put his plan into action upon arrival at Monkey Bone Island. He would simply drop them off and leave. The plan was simple and permanent. He visualized the women wandering in circles after his hasty departure.

Styles did not have long to wait before the women arrived at the marina. He was busy prepping the boat when a black town car pulled into the parking lot. Styles recognized it as the Gills car. His wife Rosanne was driving with Nelly Flynn in the front. Kitty Nova was in the back smoking a joint.

Nelly and Rosanne came out wearing sweat pants in a vain attempt to cover their plump behinds and robust upper thighs. Rosanne and Nelly did not have a tan despite the fact they lives ninety miles north of Cuba. Their arms and legs were as white elephant tusks. Kitty wore a hot pink tee shirt with a picture of a hand on front that read “Hang Loose”.

Her nipples were pressing through the material and her silicon breasts jiggled as she got out of the car. Her key lime green bikini bottom did little to conceal her features.

The three walked up to the boat on the dock. Nelly giggled giving the Captain a mock salute. She was stoned and doing her best to hide it.

"What's shaking Marty?" Kitty asked him. Marty looked over from the wheel motioning for them to board with a wave of his hand.

"Get your tails up here," Marty said as his eyes casually inspected their bodies. Marty walked over to the port side and helped them over the side rail of the boat. Meanwhile Rosanne was looking at the bulge in Marty's pants.

"Who wants to be first mate?" Marty asked the three. Kitty raised her hand.

"I do," Kitty said raising her hand. She reminded Styles of some kind of teacher's pet in grammar school with the confused look on her face.

"What do I have to do?" Kitty asked.

"I'm sure I can think of a few things later, but for right now; just go to the front and untie the bow line." Marty said sensing her inexperience around boats.

"Where's the bow?" She asked while shielding her eyes from the glare of the sun with the edge of her hand. Marty chuckled to himself shaking his head back and forth. He did not like having to think for two people.

"It's the front of the boat silly." Kitty smiled looking up at Marty. She shimmied up the side of the boat to the bow, untied the line.

Styles started the engine. Nelly and Rosanne were giggling like teenage girls making fun of Kitty's apparent stupidity. Nelly found the cooler and pulled out an imported beer in a green bottle.

"You want a beer?" She asked Rosanne.

"What do you think?" Rosanne replied as if it was a silly question.

Nelly handed her the cold bottle of suds. It was dripping wet and nearly slipped out of her hands. The women settled down in their seats as Styles steered the boat

towards the entrance of the marina.

Marty listened to the sound of the motors then slowly pushed the chrome lever forward. The boat increased speed and moved into the channel. A half hour later Styles cut the engines. They were three miles out and they could see the lighthouse and breakers crashing on White Knuckle Reef to their left and the seven-mile bridge on their right.

The lighthouse needed a paint job. The years of salt, wind and waves had worn the paint down exposing the red brick underneath. The structure had an interesting history. Nelly Flynn read somewhere that a ship had sunk nearby and that the place might be haunted.

Marty decided to fish. This would put the three at ease and then he would take them on their one-way cruise to Monkey Bone Island. Marty walked over to one of the coolers and pulled out a box of squid along with a knife and cutting board. He took down a fishing rod from the holders from the canvas rail above him.

"Who wants to fish?" Marty asked them.

"No thanks; I don't want to get my hands stinky," Nelly's said as if detesting the idea. Her response was immediate. Marty was disappointed.

"Come on. I will help, but I am not going to bait the hooks. Don't worry about getting those pretty hands dirty. You can wash them off anywhere in the Atlantic Ocean," Marty said being sarcastic.

The three decided to watch Marty fish to see what happened. He made ready the fishing rod and then opened a box of bait then began cutting one of the squids into little pieces on the cutting board. He baited the hook and dropped the line over the side.

The bait settled on the bottom near a small rocky ledge. A snapper took it and pulled it back under a ledge. Marty felt the fish taking the line and pulled the rod up gently while turning the handle on the reel as the snapper began resisting.

Marty's tension on the fish through the line was enough to overpower it and the snapper eventually yielded to Marty's efforts. The fish began ascending towards under the boat. It was about ten feet from the surface when a silvery gray shape flashed just below the surface.

The pole in Marty's hand suddenly bent like an archer's bow with the added strain from the weight of the fish. The rod sprang back in his hand and Marty reeled in what was left of the line. There was only a fish head.

"Did you see that? That was one hell of a barracuda," Marty said excitedly feeling like a kid doing something clever.

"Hold on. I am going to catch that thing."

The women on the boat watch Styles walk over to his tackle box to prepare a wire leader. He put a heavy-duty hook on one end and a barrel swivel at the other. Then he tied the end with the swivel to the line on the rod. Styles set the rod in the holder on the stern rail.

Then he rigged a hand line to catch a bait fish. He brought out a round plastic spool with ten-pound test line and fastened a small hook. He baited the hook and threw it over the side. Two minutes later he brought a small yellow tail snapper aboard that was almost three inches long which he used as bait for the barracuda.

He attached the hook at the tail and set the drag. Then he waited. The barracuda never came back. It disappeared into the reef right after it ate the other fish. Marty waited another fifteen minutes and then gave up.

The women were bored. They were talking amongst themselves about what makes men cool. Marty put the bait away and returned the pole back to the rod holder. He was ready to put his plan into action as soon as he started the engine.

They perked up once the boat started moving again. Nelly and Kitty were drinking beers while Rosanne puffed on a cigarette and thought about calling her husband. Then

she remembered she left her cell phone at home. Her mind wandered to a piece of jewelry she wanted from a store downtown. It was a gold gecko with emerald eyes. She made the decision to hold out on him until he bought it for her.

Rosanne used the tactic frequently to get what she wanted. The method would hopefully bring him into line long enough to get her the broach. She looked over at Nelly with admiration knowing her husband could never afford a place in the Bahamas. She stared at her hair flowing in the breeze from the speed of the boat wondering if she was bisexual.

“Is Chuck's other office Freeport Nelly?” Roseanne asked.

“Yeah he’s over there most of the time. It is kind of a tourist town just like Key West except the locals there are nicer. Here they are always trying to sell you things you cannot use. They are not so pushy there. I found a cute wooden pipe the last time I went I’m glad customs did not find it in my bag,” Nelly explained.

Marty Styles could see Monkey Bone Island in the distance appear as a patch of hazy green over the water a few miles away. The Delilah arrived at the northern tip of the island several minutes later. The channel was 10 feet wide and only 7 feet deep.

The boat reduced speed. Styles turned the wheel sharply when he saw the dock on his right. The stern spun around into the channel and soon the boat turned around. Now the port side was facing the entrance to the channel. The women were impressed the maneuver.

“Get ready with that line Nelly.” Marty said barking the order like he was the Captain of a Destroyer. Nelly picked up the line, bent down and then tied it off to a cleat like a professional mariner.

Kitty threw out the stern line and Nelly skillfully fastened the ropes to the dock posts like an old pro.

Rosanne and Kitty climbed off the boat walking towards the beach. Nelly was still on the dock waiting for Marty to give her more instructions.

"Don't worry about your stuff. I will bring it back in a couple of minutes. I want to look on the other side. Untie those lines Nelly and throw them back. Give me a half hour then meet me back here at the dock," Marty said.

Nelly did what she was told while Marty worked the throttle. A few seconds later the boat was moving back through the channel. The boat accelerated and then disappeared out of view. Nelly stood there not knowing what to do next.

CHAPTER 14

Marty's friend Gallagher told him what he knew about Monkey Bone Island. He said the place was once home to a colony of rhesus monkeys which were owned by a drug company then donated to the military. Styles also heard somewhere that the monkeys on the island were carnivorous and that the Bioweapons Department transformed the island into a secured military installation. Scientists from the War Department were doing secret experiments of a hideous nature under the pretext of national security.

The history of Monkey Bone Island remains somewhat a mystery to the general public. There was a rumor going around that the scientists were conducting bizarre experiments with monkeys. It was believed that a few of the test subjects escaped to Big Pine Key and were responsible for several gruesome raccoon mutilations after a hurricane in the early eighties.

An interesting article almost appeared in the *Florida Keys Straight Shooter* several years ago that would have offered clues as to what might really have been going on there. There was a report of a group of primates walking upright attacked a paddle boarder visiting the island. He barely escaped with his life after he fended off three large baboons by hitting them with their paddles. The investigating reporter did not write the story because he could not verify the information.

The fact was nobody in the general public knew the truth about Monkey Bone Island because any information released in the press would likely be a ruse by the propaganda machine.

The last thing the local government needed was unsolicited attention. The bureaucratic administration did

whatever it could to avoid it. They had no desire for protests by any animal rights organizations because of their experiments.

The facility eventually closed after a classified incident and the military lease ran out. A Judge ordered the monkeys removed and the facility torn down. Commandos from the National Guard still assault Monkey Bone Island annually during training exercises in mock attempts to secure the island.

Any description of the island should mention there are forty-two acres covered with palm trees, scrub brush, weeds and mangroves. This makes for a harsh environment for any species trying to thrive. Several creatures had made efforts to thrive since the departure of the primates in between invasions.

There is a hive of African bees in the middle of a tire. Large iguanas hide in the brush waiting to ambush seagulls. A twenty foot Burmese Python swam over after a hurricane after escaping from a zoo in Homestead. It was living on a diet of wood rats and wading birds residing in an elaborate living quarters under the ruins next to one of the abandoned monkey cages. The island also had a dozen raccoons living near the fresh water spring.

The primates on Monkey Bone Island were the subjects of one of most bizarre field experiments ever conducted in the clandestine world of military research. The brass was looking for a way to gather covert ground intelligence on civilian populations using mobile surveillance systems incorporating artificial intelligence.

The leader of the baboons was named Alpha. The primate got his name because it was the first to survive the medical trials. Alpha was a test subject in a series of complex experiments involving robotics, recombinant DNA and skeletal manipulation.

There is a large scar across Alpha's head where part of the brain was removed and replaced with sophisticated

robotics utilizing adaptive microprocessors. The scientists initially had a myriad of problems figuring out a way to house the sensory robotics within the confines of the skull. They solved the problem by creating a new one. They surgically removed part of the natural skull then replaced the missing bone with a Kevlar mold to accommodate the dimensions of the new robotics.

The second baboon surviving the trials was “Bravo”. He was programmed to protect the other two. They fitted Bravo with an advanced olfactory program and thermal imaging microprocessor, enabling the monkey to locate fresh water and sniff out game. He also had a titanium jaw with the crushing force equal to that of a crocodile.

Charlie was the only female baboon subject. Her brain was connected to a video camera and she had enhanced vocal cords enabling speech. The three baboons worked together as a team gathering coastal intelligence. The animals were eventually programmed to monitor the island for smugglers. The scientists eventually figured out that constant surveillance on the baboons was very productive in terms of raw data.

They swam back to the mainland for systems maintenance once a month. A hovering blimp landed and the handler provided medical checkups and fortified monkey chow to supplement their diet of raccoon meat. The animals learned to eat raccoons because the military brass thought hunting them would challenge the animal against a highly adaptive intelligent mammal in survival situations. The stored information obtained by the baboons was uploaded into the blimp mainframe.

Today's turn of events intrigued the handler to no end. He concluded they performed magnificently after watching the video of the lab incident.

The scientists not only tampered with the brain. They completely overhauled the skeletal structure by straightening the spine. The result was a baboon that could

walk upright. One year after their surgeries something went terribly wrong at the facility.

Charlie accidentally blew up one of the lab assistants during a target acquisition exercise. The three climbed over a fence leading into the armory. There they found a box of hand grenades and Charlie started pulling pins and tossing them. The complex was nearly destroyed and several people were dead after the smoke cleared. Somehow the baboons escaped unscathed.

The brass reluctantly scaled down the operation after the destruction of the facility. There were several inquiries coming down from the top. A General wanted an explanation regarding the millions of dollars spent. The funding committee agreed to continue the program in secret against the Court order.

Years later the beach was still scattered with driftwood and smelled like decaying vegetation. Dead Sea grass covered the shoreline along with the standard amount of trash lining the high tide mark. Tiny sand fleas began biting the interlopers as soon as they stepped onto the beach.

Kitty began smacking her legs trying to stop the attack of the sand fleas. She was angry because the island reeked and she wanted to go back to the boat. She shouted over to Rosanne several yards away.

“We can’t have a picnic here with all these bugs,” Kitty complained.

Rosanne forged ahead away from the beach. She called over to Kitty who was already going back to the dock. Kitty could see Nelly there waiting.

“Come back. I found a trail,” Rosanne said. Kitty turned around and went back over towards Rosanne and the two started down the path. Nova was feeling better. The fleas gradually stopped chewing on her legs by the time she reached the trail.

“Let’s wait for Marty and Nelly,” Rosanne said.

“Come on. They can figure out where to go,” Kitty replied.

“I wonder where this trail leads. We can’t eat on that smelly beach anyway,” Rosanne said impatiently.

Several minutes had passed since Marty left. Nelly was still waiting on the dock thinking that something might have happened to him.

“I can’t believe he left us here alone.” Nelly mumbled to herself. She watched Kitty and Rosanne on the other side of the beach disappear into the brush.

“Hey wait up,” Nelly yelled struggling to catch up.

Nelly ran towards them. The three then walked down the trail. The path twisted and turned through the dense underbrush. Several moments later they came to the old laboratory complex and a series of rusty outdoor cages for the infamous monkeys.

The area looked like a war zone. While searching for an entrance Nelly saw something in the dirt. She walked over to the base of the building staring at a hole in the ground. She saw something white protruding out of the ground several inches in front of the hole. She began kicking up clumps of soil around it with her foot. She seemed distracted for a moment then she began looking around for a stick.

She found one near the edge of the clearing, went over and picked it up. Then she returned to the object and started digging in the dirt around it. A large Burmese python deep in the hole looked at the probing wood. The rest of the fourteen-foot snake was coiled up below the surface. The snake’s tongue darted in and out sensing the vibrations in the air.

“Come here and check this out,” Nelly said scraping the dirt with the stick when she called to the others.

Kitty and Rosanne walked over and knelt down next to her wondering what it was. Nelly tried prying it loose from the ground but it was stuck. Nelly continued digging

around the sides and after several moments, she finally pried it loose from the ground. It was a monkey skull missing the lower jaw.

She hit it with the stick like a magician tapping a top hat with a wand to get the dirt out from the inside. The action made a sharp rapping sound that echoed into the brush as the dirt fell out from between the sinuses.

The sound of the tapping faded and the breeze in the air stopped blowing and everything went still. The breeze stopped and the palm fronds went silent. The island itself seemed to become aware of their presence. The three of them noticed the change in the environment and became uneasy.

Nelly considered bleaching her find and saving it as an oddity. She crammed her digging stick through the bottom as a joke to hide the fact she was nervous about the stillness around her. The end of the stick fitted neatly in the spot where the spine entered the skull. She raised the mock scepter in the air as if to declare herself queen of Monkey Bone Island.

"That's gross," Kitty said.

"Yeah it is," Rosanne agreed.

The other two thought Nelly might be going crazy. Kitty saw the humor in the situation laughing under her breath. Kitty thought the skull on a stick would be a great prop for the King of Fantasy Parade every year at the end of October.

"I'm just kidding around. Don't be so serious all the time." Nelly said trying to redeem herself.

Then they all heard a commotion in the distance. A screeching sound was coming closer from the path. The source of the noise eventually came into view. The women could not believe what they were looking at. It was a monkey coming towards them with a dead raccoon in one of his hands and it was walking on two legs. Two more monkeys followed the first emerging from the brush several

yards away.

The women ducked behind the crumbling remnants of the laboratory, hoping it would hide them from the approaching animal. Charlie could smell their presence. He had already picked up the scent of Kitty's perfume. Now all the animals were looking over in their general direction.

"Why are we hiding?" Nelly asked the others.

"If they come near us we will just start screaming at them. Don't worry I will beat them down with my monkey stick if they get too close," Nelly said confidently.

Rosanne looked at the hideous skull at the end of the stick wondering if it would stay on the stick long enough to give the monkeys a beating. Then she rolled her eyes when Nelly stood up with her scepter and waved it into the air.

"I will show those dumb apes a thing or two," Nelly said before stomping down the path. The animals turned their heads towards her voice.

The monkeys were sitting together on the ground looking in her direction. The monkey holding the raccoon ripped off a leg and handed it to one of the others then began gnawing at the fur once it had the chance.

Nelly walked towards them waving the stick. The monkey with the raccoon leg screeched at her, jumped off the ground a foot into the air, then disappeared into the underbrush with the others not far behind.

"It won't be long before those things come after us. This is serious. We are going to need some protection. We have to do something before those damn monkeys come back," Nelly suggested.

"Like what?" Rosanne asked.

Nelly thought for a moment holding her monkey scepter as she scanned the beach. For a moment, she felt like she was in the middle of a television reality show.

"We need some kind of barrier between us and them. Gather as much driftwood and as you can. Find something we can throw at those things if they come back. Look for

anything that we can use as a weapon," Nelly said.

The women worked quickly and after twenty minutes, there was a pile of driftwood shaped in a small half circle. They made a smaller pile of rocks, bottles and cans behind the woodpile. The makeshift defensive position was ten feet from the waterline.

"Nelly, what the hell is this?" Kitty yelled from a short distance away. She was standing next to a huge object covered in burlap half buried in the sand. Nelly walked over to see what Kitty was doing.

"Who knows? Dig it out. Looks like it might be food or something. It is probably a sack of rice or beans. We might be able to use it as part of the barrier," Nelly explained.

Nova leaned into it with all her weight as she pushed around the edges. It barely moved. After rocking it back and forth she eventually got it loose from the sand. Nova tried rolling the object end over end to the pile of wood, but it was too heavy.

"Help me with this thing Nelly," Nova said.

Flynn walked over and they both grabbed one side and dragged it across the sand. They eventually got it in front of the wood barrier. Nelly felt they were ready now for whatever attack the monkeys could bring. Rosanne sat down and lit a cigarette. Nelly was staring at her lighter.

"What are you looking at?" Rosanne asked.

Nelly reached out with both arms and gave her a big hug. Rosanne squirmed in her arms trying to get away.

"You have a lighter. We can make fire and signal for help. What else do you have in that pack?"

Rosanne took it off. She unzipped it and turned it upside down shaking out the contents spilling them onto the sand. Nelly picked through the items like a bargain hunter at a yard sale. There was a pack of cigarettes, Swiss Army knife, bug spray, a pint of rum, sunscreen, hand towel and a paperback book. It was not much of a survival kit but her lighter could get them rescued.

"You forgot the trail mix," Nelly joked.

"Give me a shot of that rum," Nelly said. Rosanne picked up the bottle, wiped the sand off, opened it and took a swig. She took a second swig then gave the bottle to Nelly who took a long pull before giving it back.

"Get some of those dried palm fronds over there and some more pieces of driftwood," Nelly instructed.

The three looked around for more wood, wary to leave the beach because of the monkeys. They did not want to wander too far from the woodpile.

"Let's get this fire started," Nelly said with excitement.

Nelly ripped out some pages from the paperback and crumpled them into a ball. Then she put the paper under the woodpile with some twigs and lit the paper. The kindling caught the flame first then the driftwood ignited. Soon a substantial fire was popping and crackling as the flames rose into the air.

"When it gets big enough we can put on some of that damp sea grass to make smoke. A boat will see it from miles away," Nelly affirmed.

They fed the fire with wood from the sides of the pile. It grew and the sparks from it rose into the air with the billowing smoke. The side of burlap bale ignited and a smoke of a different kind filled the air.

"What's that funky smell?" Kitty asked the others.

"That smells like pot," Nelly said surprised.

"I am getting me some of that for later. You can never have too much weed," Kitty said. She put her hand over her mouth grabbing the other side of the bale as she tried to pull it out of the flames. Kitty moved it about a foot then clawed at the burlap like a cat on a scratch post trying to rip it open from the other side.

Rosanne moved next to her. Then she got an idea. She took the knife out of her pack and cut a hole in the far side. It was not long before the three were ripping handfuls of pot from the bale. Nelly and Kitty stuffed it into their

pockets while Rosanne filled up her backpack with as much weed as she could.

The dope smoke rose quietly from Monkey Bone Island. It did not take long before they were all stoned. It became a true signal fire when Nelly added the green palm fronds. The women sat in the sand behind their defensive position laughing for several minutes.

The monkeys watched the fire burn from a short distance away. The animals could smell the reefer smoke while listening to their conversation. Alpha liked the odor but not the sight of flames. Something inside his brain warned him to stay away.

Alpha stood on the edge of the clearing, holding the raccoon by the back leg staring at the women for several moments. The three monkeys yawned in unison as if on cue before retreating into the brush. The monkeys returned to the shade of the ruins to settle down for an afternoon nap.

The fire was roaring while the women were sitting together with their backs towards the ocean. The air above the beach was thick with the whitish blue smoke from the fire. Kitty heard a motor and looked towards the open water. She saw a white speck coming closer with each passing moment.

"I see a boat," Kitty announced to the others.

Nelly could make out the green Marine Patrol insignia on the gray side of the craft when it approached the shore. The boat turned and was moving perpendicular to the shoreline several yards from the beach.

It was Hernandez and Sweeney. Pablo looked over at Kitty recognizing her immediately. She blushed when Pablo winked at her.

"You have no idea how glad we are to see you guys," Kitty said as it approached the shore. The bow of the boat hit the bottom sand and Sweeny turned off the motor. Pablo began helping the women on board. All of their eyes were bloodshot and they were stumbling on the deck like a trio

of drunk college girls leaving a fraternity party.

"Are you O.K?" Sweeney asked.

"We are fine," Nelly said grinning.

"What the hell were you burning?" Pablo asked.

"I think we found a bale. We used it to create smoke," Kitty explained. She tried telling Pablo what else happened that day, but she could not complete a sentence without laughing.

"Damn I forgot my monkey stick," Nelly said to the group.

"Well go get it," Rosanne told her.

"Forget it. I just thought it would have been a cool souvenir."

Sweeney started the engines and put them in reverse. He pushed the throttle slightly forward and turned the wheel. The boat backed out of the shallows surrounding the island. He turned the boat around, put it in gear then accelerated the engines once the water was deep enough. The boat skimmed across the waves.

Pablo looked over at Kitty and raised his voice over the sound of the engines.

"What the hell were you doing on that island?" Pablo asked.

"A friend dropped us off and was supposed to come back," Kitty explained.

"Where do you think he went?" Pablo inquired.

"I'm not sure. He probably had trouble with the boat. Forget about him. I really had a good time the other night," Kitty said before smiling.

Pablo was in breeding mode whenever Kitty came around. Just being next to her was like ringing the dinner bell. He could not help being aroused by the smell her perfume. The scent triggered a cluster of neurons deep in his brain that sent blood rushing into his private parts.

"We have to get together again soon.so you can eat some more egg rolls," Pablo said remembering the joke

Sweeney made about comparing his pecker to the appetizer. Nelly was half listening to their conversation when she interrupted them.

"You know there are monkeys walking around that island?" Nelly said to anybody listening. Nobody seemed to care.

CHAPTER 15

Van Wade regained consciousness feeling a primordial fear griping his heart in a chilling embrace. His throat was dry and there were steel handcuffs around his wrists. His mouth was taped shut and a blindfold covered his eyes. He focused on the searing pain behind his eyeballs.

Wade heard the creaking of the boat and the faint smell of gasoline. Spanish speaking voices were discussing how far to go offshore and whether or not to use the lights. They speakers agreed it was best to have them on while leaving the marina then turn them off since they could well enough by the moonlight. Carlos turned on the lights.

Imelda released the bow and stern lines then the boat pulled away from the dock. Carlos pushed the throttle forward and the engines began to fill the air behind the stern with smoke. The boat moved into the channel. A few moments passed before Carlos steered for the red marker lights that would guide him out to the reef. The journey to the lighthouse would take almost an hour.

Carlos listened to the sound of the engine. The first channel marker came into sight. He approached it doing 10 knots passing 50 feet to the left. Carlos sighted the light on the next channel post a few hundred yards away and steered towards it continuing onward past the next four markers until he was far from shore.

The lighthouse on White Knuckle Reef was getting close. Carlos eased up on the throttle. The boat moved effortlessly, gliding through the water. Carlos could see the loading dock and the keeper's quarters in the moonlight when the boat approached the lighthouse. Then he saw another boat forty yards away on the other side of the reef. It was a fishing boat moving away.

Cortez could see that there were people on the stern

while Wade heard their laughter screams as the boat past by forty yards to their right. A few minutes later the boat was past the lighthouse then he turned the engine off. Imelda looked down at Van Wade at the stern lying motionless on the deck.

Imelda got her pistol. She took the weapon and put it in the crook of her back, covering it with her tee shirt. Then she returned to the wheelhouse.

"It is time to take the hand of fate," Cortez said.

She smiled as she walked back towards him. Van Wade was sitting helplessly on the deck waiting for the inevitable while the boat was silently drifting in the current. Wade felt the footsteps of men approaching through the deck. Cortez spoke softly as she looked at him.

"I am truly sorry that things have to be this way. We all must die sometime. You have become a liability and it is too risky to keep you alive with everything that you know. Maybe you can understand. Do you have anything to say for yourself before you begin your journey?" Cortez asked him before reaching down to rip the tape from his mouth. Wade felt the tearing on his cheeks and around his lips. He already accepted the fact his life would soon be over.

"Take off the blindfold." Wade asked.

She granted the request and removed it. Van Wade saw two figures standing over him. His eyes were blurry and he could barely distinguish their features. His tried to focus on the direction of the voice above him. Imelda Cortez looked at Wade's watering eyes.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" Carlos Cortez asked.

The voice seemed vaguely familiar. It haunted his dreams for as long as he could remember. Then Wade saw a gold tooth in his mouth glitter for a moment and remembered. The realization hit him like a sledgehammer leaving him speechless.

Carlos did not recognize Van Wade or remember his

parents. He had killed so many since that day in the desert. Imelda Cortez took the pistol from behind her back under and chambered a round, clicking off the safety switch with her thumb. She pointed the barrel directly at the center of Van Wade‘s forehead and cocked the trigger.

She was just about to pull the trigger when she felt her body quiver as the spirit entered her body and take control. Imelda moved the pistol away from his head and pointed it at Carlos. Then she pulled the trigger twice in rapid succession. The force of the bullets striking her nephew knocked him over the rail into the water.

The sound of the shots echoed into the night and the air around the wheel filled with smoke and smell of gunpowder. Imelda went to the rail then fired twice more into the floating body. She watched it sink and slowly yielding to the current as it drifted away. A lifeless hand reached towards the lighthouse before it quietly slipped beneath the surface of the water.

Wade did not say a word. Cortez went back to the console and started the engine. The sound of the diesel engine rumbled in the night air as she turned the boat around back towards the lighthouse. Imelda pulled next to the loading dock beneath the keeper’s quarters a few minutes later. Then she walked back to the stern and unfastened his hands from the cuffs.

“Get up,” Imelda ordered.

Van Wade rose to his feet. He felt unsteady as the blood returned to his hands pulsed through his fingertips.

“Now get out,” Cortez demanded. Wade looked at her as if he did not hear her.

“I said get out. Don’t worry. Someone will come by eventually and pick you up,” Cortez said sure of herself. Wade climbed up onto the loading dock then looked down at Imelda standing at the wheel.

“I suggest you leave town Mr. Wade. They say the Central American Republic is a great place for a vacation.

There is a watering hole in Puerto Sueno called La Cantina Rosa. Someone will help you if you make it there alive," She said seemingly challenging him. Then she waved goodbye and the boat separated from the dock.

Van Wade watched the vessel fade into the night as it steered for the coast. He was alone with his thoughts under the light of the moon sitting on the loading dock, looking up towards the keeper's quarters thinking about Mexico and the day his parents died by the gas station. He sat there with his feet hanging over the edge. Several minutes went by then Wade heard moaning followed by the sound of chains rattling above and behind him.

The noise was coming closer and felt his nerves tingling and then his body began convulsing. The apparition appeared above him. It descended from the top of the lighthouse as a glittering mist sparkling in the night air. The spirit of a black hearted pirate descended from above then went right through him.

Wade felt a feeling of never ending sorrow and the loneliness of an abandoned soul. The feeling subsided and then he lost consciousness. He dreamed of a ship lost in raging storm.

Waves towered all around him and he felt the terror of a man about to die. He saw lightning flickering in the darkness. Then he heard a tremendous crack as he saw the ship's mast fell. There was a searing pain in both of his shoulders. The dream ended and everything went black again. The phantom came out of him returning to the top of the lighthouse.

The darkness of the night eventually yielded to the dawn. Wade woke up then looked towards the East at the rising sun. His whole body ached especially his shoulders. He massaged his left one. The pain lingered there then slowly melted away. Wade was thirsty and his eyes stung from the salty grit on his eyelids. He thought about his parents and that day in the desert again and cried.

CHAPTER 16

Van Wade got his ride back to Key West from a boatload of tourists snorkeling on the reef. He told the crew of the catamaran that his friends stranded him there as a practical joke. He was back by four in the afternoon.

Wade was exhausted when he got home. He took a shower and then laid down for a nap on the sofa. When he woke up it was 3:45pm. He decided to go for a walk before dinner so he changed clothes and left his apartment in the general direction of the beach.

Wade was making footprints in the sand thirty minutes later. He sat down to rest on the sea wall and thought about the ghost. Then he pondered on Imelda's instructions, wondering if he should go to Central America. Van Wade looked out over the water towards the setting sun. His shirt was soaked with perspiration. He left the sea wall and walked onto the pier after a brief rest.

Seagull droppings covered the planks below him. He looked down at the water through the spaces between the boards as he walked. He saw a man sitting on a white plastic bucket when he finally looked up at the end of the pier. He was wearing a palm frond hat, holding a fishing rod facing the open ocean. His skin was tan and wrinkled from endless hours under the tropical sun. Sunglasses made of dark blue glass protected his eyes.

Van Wade approached him. He did not bother him. There were other times the fisherman became annoyed with tourists that took his picture without asking or interrupted him with stupid questions. He remembered Wade and their talk about baseball and stood up.

"Good afternoon Van. How are you today?"

"I am doing fine," Wade answered.

"Where are you from?" The man asked wishing to

continue their last conversation.

"I'm from many places," Wade replied.

"Are a citizen of The Homeland?"

"You could say that," Wade responded.

"Are you a *good* citizen?" The fisherman inquired.

The man began turning the handle of the reel retrieving several yards of the fishing line then. He noticed that here was no fish on the end yet when the hook came out of the water. The man tilted the rod behind his shoulder after setting the bale then whipped it forward, casting the line into the water.

"I pay my taxes," Wade answered.

"That is not what I meant," The old man said. The fisherman felt a nibble on the line. A fish stole the bait. He knew it and now the man was pretending to fish.

"You know The Homeland was never discovered. People have been here all along. The Spanish like to say they found the place, but the Indians were already living here doing just fine."

"How is that my problem?"

"You said you were a citizen."

"That's right," Wade insisted.

The old man was determined to pursue the subject no matter the outcome of their conversation. He was starting to get on Wade's nerves.

"That's right. I am a citizen," Wade asserted himself again.

"You are wrong. The fact is you are just another trespasser on Indian land bumbling along with his head up his rear end." The old man said surprising himself with his own frankness.

"What did you say?" Van Wade asked insulted. He could not believe what the man just said. Van Wade felt a pressing urge to walk away.

The fisherman sensed the change in his mood and began reeling in the line. He stopped turning the reel then

stood up by his white bucket exhaling as if he had just finished a long journey to the position.

Wade sat down on the edge of the pier. Seconds later he had almost forgotten about the insult. His feet were dangling over the water. The angler was sitting on his bucket now three feet away to his right.

Wade was looking over the edge of the pier down at the ripples moving in the water thinking the old man was probably lonely and just wanted to talk. He did not leave because the old man was interesting and far from predictable. Wade had nothing better to do and the intellectual diversion was not hurting him.

“Have you ever heard of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? What about the land of the free or home of the brave?”

“Sure I heard of that stuff,” Wade finally said after taking a few moments before speaking.

“Do you think people cherish those ideals?” The man asked.

“I think most of us are trying to make a living so we can feed our families and pay the bills. People do not worry about that liberty stuff much anymore. I think they are busy just trying to survive and earn a living,” Wade said feeling confident about his answer.

“How can people forget about those ideas?”

“I don’t think they forgot about them. They just don't have time to think about them. Maybe they just have to be reminded,” Wade said.

“I believe if you are not willing to bleed and die to protect your freedom, liberty, independence and pursuit of happiness you don’t deserve the privilege.

“Those ideas were written down somewhere in the Constitution before The Homeland incorporated,” Wade said without a hint of emotion.

“Sounds like some kind of milk,” The fisherman replied.

"You might be thinking of reconstituted milk. The Constitution did not come from a cow. It was a document written a long time ago. Some say it probably never existed since there is hardly any evidence of it today. I think the people in the halls of power filed it away somewhere and simply forgot about it," Wade explained.

The fisherman remembered the stories his grandfather told him while he was boy about The Homeland during the time when they called it America. He recalled that he said America was a beacon of hope for the rest of the world before the skinning of the buffaloes and the endless parade of people moving west in search of the yellow metal that made men crazy.

"Documents turn into dust and so do people when they die. We are spirits in the whirlwind of life. What has happened to the spirit of freedom? They do not teach kids in school about the slaughter of the Indians. All people care about these days is what they can buy next and paying off their credit cards," The old man explained.

The sun was setting and the water captured the bright reflection creating thousands of blinding points of light within the ripples. The old man was squinting thinking his sunglasses needed to be darker. He reached into his front shirt pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. He took one out and then set the pack by the white bucket. He lit it up, inhaled then exhaled the smoke before spitting into the water.

"A patriot once said we should ask ourselves what we can do for the country instead of what we can do for ourselves," Wade said wanting to make a contribution to the moment.

"What happened to him?"

"They ambushed him," Wade answered.

"Who were they?" The fisherman asked.

"I'm not sure. Word around the campfire was he tried to take away the control of the money supply away from

gangsters wearing fancy suits and big black hats," Wade explained.

Raffy spit into the water again, watching the concentric circles radiate outward like tiny sound waves beginning their endless journey into the vastness of the open ocean.

"Somebody really did that?" The fisherman asked the question as if he already knew he would be disgusted with the answer.

"What a shame," Raffy said.

The old man looked at the approaching dark gray clouds in the distance. The purple and blue clouds reminded him of puffy bruises on the face of a nation. He looked down at the water as a tear came to his eye letting it fall from his face before spitting into the water again.

"The government does not care about you and me. They are shareholders of a corporation that think of liberty and freedom as the right to buy and sell slaves. They preach the rule of law. What they really mean is rules are made by the money manipulators, protected by lawyers and enforced by the guns of the police," The fisherman explained.

"I wonder what happened to that old that flag." Van said trying to change the subject despite the fact all this talk about intangibles was wearing him down.

"What flag?"

"There used to be a flag with a snake coiled up and a forked tongue coming out of the mouth. The snake represented the original states of what used to be America. The snake on the flag had thirteen parts. Each segment had the name of a state written on it. The nation would be dangerous to the bankers only if the parts worked together in unison. The flag had the words; "Don't Tread on Me" at the bottom," Wade explained.

"I know of no such flag, but I like the idea. I guess a snake has the right not to be chopped up. No matter how many pieces they make out of it. They also have the right to liberty as it pertains to the extent of their appetite during

their pursuit of happiness. Maybe the snake is really our government in disguise since they have a forked tongue and lie all the time. Look at what happened to the Indians and all their damn treaties. That is proof enough for me," The fisherman said. Wade nodded his head in agreement.

"Let's forget about snakes and flags. What makes a person a defender of liberty? It is their ideals and strength of their convictions. I believe if a person loves freedom that makes them an enemy to their captives. These days we are the prisoners of those printing the money," The old man said as he reeled in his line. Droplets of water flew into the air as the line coiled around the reel.

"I'm talking about the content of a person's character. Americans are supposed to be all about liberty, freedom and their right to pursue happiness. They should be ready to fight and die if necessary for their convictions. I am one of the last of my kind. I bear witness to the enslavement of a nation unaware their captors exist.

I think about the war mongers that convince people to die for The Homeland and their flag of stripes and stars. These brave warriors are deceived because their love of freedom is used as a crutch by the bankers to steal resources from other countries under the cloak of greed for profit. What is the corporate vision for the future of humanity?

One that brings everybody closer to a flaming demise in the mushroom cloud of a nuclear explosion. The promoters and merchants of war are the true enemy. They sell their weapons to both sides waiting for those doing the fighting to kill themselves off. Then they can get the natural resources from the places they were fighting.

None of that matters anymore. It will all be over soon. The Great Spirit has had it with the Spectators," The old man said.

Then he spit in the water again peering into the distant horizon. Van Wade's legs were going numb. He stood up

and stretched them out. He felt the electrical jolts shooting down his sciatic nerve. The old man realized Wade was ready to leave.

“Think about who is destroying this world in the name of greed and profit. Where is the love in their hearts? Do they care nothing for the world they leave behind for their children? All they want to do is make profits from wars and hijack natural resources. That's no way to live,” The fisherman insisted. He spit in the water one last time as if adding his mucous to the moment could somehow emphasize the point of it all.

“This continent belonged to a forgotten people moving through the living forest during an age where time meant nothing. They loved their lives, liberty and independence. What happened to them?” The fisherman already knew the answer as well as the future for the entire human race. It was not a pleasant one.

“They were erased like chalk on a black board,” Wade answered.

“Winner, winner, chicken dinner! The real Americans died by the millions from disease, starvation and war in the name of the white man’s idea of progress. They abused them and broke their backs with the weight of their oppression. This country is nothing but a monument to man’s inhumanity towards the Native Americans. A testimony of theft, murder, slavery and never ending lies. Do you call that progress? You must never forget your history Van. There is no hope for the future if you do. This is the lesson everyone must understand,” The old man explained.

“I see your point,” Wade replied.

The fisherman wanted Van Wade to move along now. Wade sensed he did not feel like talking anymore so he stood up and began walking away. Wade heard the man talking to himself as he headed down the pier back to the beach wondering if Raffy might be going crazy.

CHAPTER 17

The castaways were arrested the next day after Detective Street called McGregor at the Violent Crimes Unit. Judge Ryan signed the search warrants of the various properties after a text message from the VCU to the State Attorney's Office.

Max Coles was the prosecutor assigned to the case. He planned to throw the book at Kitty and her friends once the evidence taken from their homes was processed. Then they would go after the law firm Styles & Flynn.

The police officers assigned to the detail were looking specifically for more drugs, financial statements, checkbooks, credit card receipts and anything else that might relate to Two Reale Solutions. Coles was also interested in any information on the firm Styles & Flynn and wanted anything that might link them to the missing money. He found it when he learned they shared the same accountant.

Nelly Flynn called her husband collect in Freeport several times from the jail. There was no answer. She knew better than anyone to keep her mouth shut and wait for her husband to come to her legal rescue. Max Coles had a strong case against the firm involving the wire transfers of s grant funds to the Bahamas. The pot she had crammed in her pockets did not help her situation.

The cops arrested Rosanne Gills with a backpack full of marijuana. Max Coles charged her with possession and accessory after the fact pertaining to the grant money. Street traced some of the money from the Two Reale Solutions checking account to her personal account.

Kitty was also giving Rosanne cash for her husband’s upcoming election. Other questionable expenses included her trips to the health spa, cruise ship tickets and other incidentals that helped her enjoy the weekends.

Judge Ryan might take into consideration the death of Rosanne's husband if she cooperated. The detectives were waiting for the right time to inform her of that detail. When they broke the news it would make her emotionally unstable. Then they would lean on her and intimidate a confession out of her. These tactics were commonplace in the island city. Skirting the rules of civil procedure was an everyday occurrence. Judge Ryan would allow the confession under protest from the public defender.

The search of Nova's house on Lazy Lizard Drive uncovered a mountain of incriminating evidence regarding multiple frauds. Kitty Nova had no legal sense whatsoever. She would work that fat mouth of hers into a circle as much as she needed to save herself from doing hard time. She did have an ace in her hole that she could pull out if everything else failed.

The most damning item recovered in the search of her home was her diary. Inside there was a complete list of all her clients from Peek & Boo's Escort Service. Kitty hid the diary in her red suitcase underneath the top compartment. The entries were specific. They included names, dates, money, locations and particulars of service. .

Judge Ryan confiscated the diary and put it into his personal safe at his house. He decided it would never reach the courtroom because his name was included in Kitty's entries of supposedly upstanding people in the local community. The diary also contained the names of numerous movie, music and sports celebrities who visited the island.

Kitty had other more notable clients. They included a member of the Republican War Cabinet and to their amazement, the wife of a former Vice President. The Second Lady turned out to be a lesbian with sadistic kinks. She developed a crush on Kitty during their time together.

Judge Ryan nearly had a stroke when he read the diary. He marched right over to the State Prosecutor's office and

slammed the door then proceeded to scream at him for nearly an hour.

Coles recommended Kitty to the Judge in the first place. He said she could help him with his inability to sustain an erection. Coles eventually calmed him down explaining that Kitty Nova would be silenced permanently.

"Not a word about that diary to anybody. Do you understand? If this gets out we will be sitting ducks on the first day of hunting season," The Judge warned.

There were no ducks in Key West but there were a few waddling around Stock Island at the city golf course making muck on the sixteenth fairway. An occasional bird from the same flock appeared on the menu at Mr. Sims Chinese restaurant out on the Boulevard.

"My God man have you seen the names in that diary? That bitch. You never know the depth of a woman's craftiness," Coles said with a look on his face as if he just opened a rotten egg.

Coles had a private exhibition of Kitty's filthy skill set a year ago at a bachelor party. He paid her a hundred bucks and she gave him a lesson any dirty mind would never forget. What Coles did not know was Kitty Nova left him with a viral business card compliments of one of her cruise ship clients. She contracted the virus from a millionaire sheik visiting Key West on holiday from a village near the Dead Sea.

The virus transmitted to Kitty was a variation of the avian flu and a real nasty one. The original template came from a laboratory at Area 61 under the Cyrus Project. It was field tested successfully decades ago on a nomadic desert tribe somewhere in the Middle East.

The Defense Department knew all about it. The incubation period was one year. The symptoms manifested themselves in ten percent of those exposed. Half of the ones that did not show symptoms became carriers. The field trials went well and the brass considered the Cyrus

Project a huge success.

The Judge called McGregor at the Violent Crimes Unit later that day. The Director's secretary Margie Owens answered the phone.

"This is Judge Ryan in Key West. Can I speak to the Director?"

"I'm sorry; he is not available," Owens replied.

"When he will be back?" Ryan inquired.

"He went to the Bahamas for a fishing tournament. He should be back in the office on Monday," Owens explained.

"Could you have him call my office? It is very important," The Judge insisted sounding desperate.

"I will give him your message," The secretary assured him.

There was now a contract out on Kitty Nova. The hit went to a drug attic named Tammy Tinsel. She would do anything for Laredo and went along with the plan without hesitation. Laredo promised her she would be out in ten days riding home on brand new motorcycle.

The plan was to feed her crushed sleeping pills during chow time and then Tinsel would sneak into her cell to give her a lethal dose of heroin. Tinsel was the perfect person to complete the mission. She was a heroin addict that loved shooting up her friends. She could find a vein as easily as Route 1.

Kitty was sitting at one of the steel tables in the jail watching a juicy soap opera on the Spanish channel. She had a fever and her forehead felt like it was on fire. The last thing Kitty Nova remembered was looking up at the clock above the guard's desk.

At exactly 3:22pm she saw purple spots then blacked out. Her head hitting the ground sounded like a hollow cantaloupe bouncing on the floor. Miss Tinsel heard the sound of Kitty's head hitting the floor and her lips twisted into a perverted smile. The guard at the desk called the infirmary before walking over to the body. The nurse in the

infirmary sent over two technicians to investigate the fuss. They found Kitty unconscious with a blue mouse on the back of her head. Two aides picked her up by the arms and dragged her away to the infirmary.

The nurses connected her to numerous wires and other assorted technological bells and whistles. There was an intravenous line in her arm and electrodes on her chest to monitor her heart rhythm. A catheter was shoved deep inside her privates to capture her urine. The prison doctor examined her and found her face, arms and chest covered with red dots resembling the chicken pox.

Test tubes of her blood and urine went to the hospital for analysis. The doctor inspecting the samples under an electron microscope called the Health Department. The call was recorded by the facility in the interest of National Secrecy.

"This is Dr. Maggie Stark in Key West. I need to report a medical event please," She requested.

"Just a moment; I will connect you to Community Relations," There was a pause followed by a dial tone. Then Dr. Stark heard a recording.

"Please check the number and dial again if you would like to make a call," The tape said. This was followed by another click and then the line went dead. Dr. Stark hung up. She picked up the phone again and hit the redial button. A different voice answered this time.

"Hello can I help you?" The operator asked.

"Community Relations please," Stark responded.

A few seconds went by then a male voice came on the line. The man on the other end was Dr. Spiff. He was wasting time reading a girlie magazine at the time of the call.

"Is this the Community Relations Department?"

"What can I do for you?" Spiff asked. Stark pulled herself closer to the desk in her swivel chair with her free hand.

“My name is Maggie Stark. I was examining a blood sample here from a 35 year old female with some sort of virus,” Dr. Stark explained.

“What are her symptoms?” Spiff asked while finding a sticky pad and pen for taking notes.

“All her vital signs are elevated. Her heart rate is up around 150. She has a fever and her arms have red spots on them and she was bleeding from her gums and ears,” Dr. Stark replied.

“That’s it; I have heard enough. You quarantine her right away and prepare that patient for transport to the Center for Quality Control here in Miami.”

“Why?” Dr. Stark asked.

“Sounds like you might have a case of avian flu on your hands. It is a dirty little viral strain with military origins. Humans get it by inhaling dust from dried rooster droppings. They pass it to one another during sexual relations in their bodily fluids. Does the patient show any signs of muscle twitching like jerking movements at the wrist or neck?” Spiff asked while picking up a call list scanning it for the number of the Section Chief.

Dr. Stark thought for a moment. She was already flipping through Nova’s chart searching for more information that might be important.

“Not that I recall. She is in the infirmary at the jail,” Starke said.

“Listen very carefully. We need to find out the identities of all of her sexual partners. I am going to have to quarantine the entire island until that is done.”

“That seems a little extreme.” Dr. Stark responded.

“Don't kid yourself doctor. This flu is a nasty bug. The virus made an appearance in the Middle East and wiped out hundreds of nomadic tribesman before they got the disease under control. That was back in the 1930's. Does her lab work show anything unusual?” Dr. Spiff asked.

“She has an elevated white count. Is there a cure for this

bug?" Dr. Starke inquired.

"Who knows? I am going to call Central Control. The only option we have right now is to keep the virus from spreading as best as we can. I do not know exactly how just yet but I read somewhere there was some research being done with lion fish to slow the mutation rate of avian viruses," Spiff informed her.

"So how *did they* stop the outbreak?" Starke asked.

"Do you really want to know?"

"Sure," Dr. Stark answered.

"They stoned them," Dr. Spiff confessed.

"Did they kill the people or the roosters?" Starke asked wanting the specifics.

"That's classified. Just get that patient up here. I will start the quarantine procedures right away. I am going to have to declare a biological emergency on the island and notify the Section Chief," Dr. Spiff said regretfully.

Dr. Stark did not want to make waves. She was content to complete the day without any problems. Right now she wanted to get home and cook dinner then spend the rest of the evening playing with her cat.

"Do you have to do that?" Dr. Spiff sighed.

"I really don't have a choice. We do not have enough data on the other potential carriers. These steps are precautionary measures. Notify your Medical Director down there and give him my name. I will arrange air ambulance service for the patient. Our plane will be there by five tonight. Have her prepped and ready to fly out by four thirty. You did the right thing calling us," Dr. Spiff said then he hung up.

Dr. Stark finished jotting down the particulars of the conversation. Then she called the Medical Director and the charge nurse at the jail to relay the patient transfer data. She looked through the microscope once more into the blood sample. The virus on the slide was multiplying.

CHAPTER 18

Detective Street flew from Key West to Freeport in a twin propeller airplane. The plane was provided to the Violent Crimes Unit by a subsidiary of an airline owned by The Homeland called Beagle Air. Gordy the pilot greeted him on the tarmac. Street climbed inside and stowed his travel bag on the empty seat behind him. The pilot climbed aboard right after him, sealed the door and then sat down in the cockpit.

Gordy was ready to fly after checking several dials and switching a dozen knobs. The airplane moved into position to leave. He radioed the tower and gritted his teeth while the plane accelerated down the runway. When Gordy pulled back on the yoke, the plane rose like a metallic bird into the air.

"This is my favorite part," Gordy said.

He took off his headset and looked at Street through his aviator sunglasses after the plane leveled off at the cruising altitude. The volume of his voice more than compensated for the drone made by the plane's propellers.

"Your codename for Operation Piggy Bank is Kingfisher. You can refer to me as Frigate. Most people just call me Gordy when I am around the office. The Director wants you to make contact Chuck Flynn and serve him some legal papers. He wants all that money from the Still's & Flynn account at the Cay Sal Bank and whatever else is in his safety deposit box," Gordy said while reaching into the inside of his flight jacket. He pulled out an envelope while leaving one hand on the steering yoke.

"Here are the papers to seize the assets. Send the funds to the Violent Crimes Unit account by wire transfer. Contact Willy Wilcox at the Cay Sal Bank and give him the papers. Then go to Flynn's house and arrest that son of a bitch," Gordy instructed.

The plane hit some turbulence and Gordy put his other hand back on the yoke to compensate. The plane leveled out once again.

"We have already contacted Wilcox and he knows that you are on the way. Flynn's office is at 411 Brickyard Avenue. You can located him there if you are lucky. His house is a few miles from the only lighthouse in Freeport in case he is not there.

There has to be a safe somewhere in Flynn's office or at the house. Find it and retrieve the contents. Then go over to the Cay Sal Bank and have Wilcox give you a copy of the firm's bank account statement. He has the safety deposit box key and will get you inside. He might be hiding some record of that missing money. Keep any cash you find in the box."

"You are kidding right?" Street asked. Gordy was not joking.

"We *are* the law and we do whatever we want. This is the only way we can keep up with the bad guys who do what they feel like." Gordy could tell the idea did not sit well with his sense of right and wrong. Street looked as if he wanted to say something about the cash.

"Shut up and keep the money. Bring me any other evidence when you are ready to leave. Operation Piggy Bank begins tomorrow at 0800. You will be on the clock around breakfast time. Keep that in mind when you are eating your chicken and waffles," Gordy said.

Street did not like his tone. What he really wanted was to crack him in the mouth and wipe that smirk off his face. He thought Gordy was cool when he boarded. He was convinced now he was a cocky jerk that needed a slap.

Gordy radioed Freeport Air Control for the landing information. A few minutes later a patch of green appeared out of the water in the distance. Street saw the buildings and the roads on the ground gradually getting closer. It was not long before the plane landed and taxied toward the

terminal.

Gordy opened the side door of the aircraft and threw Street's canvas bag onto the tarmac like a spoiled sack of potatoes. The detective stepped into the sweltering heat of the tarmac and picked up his belongings.

"Thanks a lot Gordy. Trying to get rid of me?" Street asked kidding around. Gordy did not answer him. He was already busy inspecting the controls before the return flight to Miami. He looked at him one last time.

"One more thing Kingfisher: Stay away from the local police if you can help it. All they do is complicate situations. Keep it simple and get the hell out of here with Flynn and his money," Gordy advised him.

Street picked up his bag and walked over to the terminal entrance several yards away. There he saw a dark blue sign with white lettering that read "Customs".

He went over to the glass door and opened it. The first thing he noticed was the picture on the wall. It was a map of the West Indies with all the routes of the airline indicated by green lines. The floor had tan carpeting. A ticket booth doubled as a custom inspector's stand beside a glass door leading to the duty free shop in the main terminal. A well-groomed customs official wearing a white shirt with black pants opened the door. He went over to a podium carrying some papers along with his customs stamp and ink pad.

"Could you give me a moment please?" The man asked while trying to organize his work area. He was ready to process Street into the country after Street waited about two minutes. The official looked at the detective with tired eyes. He studied him like a piece on a chessboard before moving it.

"Do you have anything to declare?" He finally asked.

"No Sir," Street replied promptly.

"Are you here on business or pleasure?"

"I'm just here to do some fishing. I guess that's pleasurable," Street said.

“Hand me your passport,” The official said. Street reached into his front shirt pocket and took it out giving it to the customs official. The man took it, flipped some pages then stamped it with the required stamp.

“Your passport expires in a month Mr. Street. Make sure you are out of the country before August 30th.”

“I don’t know how I missed that.” Street answered.

“Enjoy your stay in the Bahamas,” He said.

“You are not going to check my bag?” Street asked him.

“I am on my lunch break as of right now. Have a nice day,” The official explained. The man walked over and unlocked the door to the tarmac.

Street strolled over to the duty free shop and bought a bottle of rum then left the terminal to hail a taxi. He opened the back door, threw his bag inland sat down after the red and yellow cab pulled up to the curb.

The driver looked at him in the rear view mirror, sizing him up, wondering if he might require something like drugs or woman for the night. The driver studied his reflection and watched him open a pint bottle of rum. He nodded his head with approval when he saw Street take a swig.

“I’m Norman. They call me Stormin Norman. If you need anything on the island while you are here like smoke or a lady friend, you call me,” The driver said while reaching back to give him a business card.

Street took it glancing at it briefly. It read Norman Saunders. There was a caricature of a yellow cab puffing a cloud of cartoon smoke zooming across the bottom edge of the card. He put it in his shirt pocket.

“Take me to the Conch Shell Motel,” Street requested.

“No problem. We will be there in a few minutes,” Norman assured him. The ride from the airport to the motel took fifteen minutes. The property consisted of a main building made of concrete cinder blocks painted an outlandish turquoise and white. Behind the office were three units of ten rooms in a box formation with a pool in

the middle and a tiki bar in the back. Tropical landscaping filled the spaces in between the buildings.

The detective pulled himself out of the back seat and got out with his canvas bag. He stopped for a moment leaning next to the window and paid the driver.

"Thanks for the ride Norman. I might want to go fishing later on in the week. I will throw you some cash for setting it up if you know a good boat with fair prices. I have your card and I will give you a shout when I am finished with my business," Street told him before walking into the motel with his belongings.

The woman at the desk was named Gigi. She was a skinny colored woman with deep brown eyes. Street glanced at the pink conch shell patch over her heart. She thought he was looking at her breast and smiled then assigned him to a room across from the pool. She gave him two extra towels from a cardboard box at her feet and told him the bar served food until seven at night and that he could catch a bus out front of the lobby if he wanted to go into town.

Street went to his room, unpacked his bag then took a shower and changed clothes. When he left his room again he looked like any another tourist with his blue Hawaiian shirt, bathing shorts and flip-flops. The detective spent the rest of the afternoon lounging by the pool reading a paperback. After two hours, he felt his skin starting to burn so he went back to his room. He took a long hot shower and then went to bed early. He drifted off to sleep thinking about his next briefing to the Director.

Street was confident that he was making progress with the Jones case. He knew Gills worked with Styles. He surmised any drug or fraud scheme must involve Flynn, since Nova's checks led to his wife's association with the school district money and both of Kitty Nova's corporations. All he had to do now was follow the money.

CHAPTER 19

Street caught the first bus into Freeport from outside of the motel. Most of the people on board were locals on their way to work at the hotels downtown. The bus made several stops on the way before merging into the main route going directly into the heart of the city.

He checked his progress using a map from the front desk. Street got off two blocks from the Styles & Flynn office on Brickyard Avenue. He looked at the map once more then walked over to the law office. He was standing in front of a yellow and white colonial styled house when he arrived at the address.

He looked down both ends of the street before he opened the gate then walked up the steps. There was no answer when he knocked on the door. Street turned around and walked back down the stairs, proceeding down a walkway on the side of the house leading to a back entrance. He knocked on it several times. There was still no answer.

Street reached in his pocket and produced his lock picking tools. He delicately finessed the instruments into the keyhole, working the lock until it opened. Street stepped inside and closed it quietly behind him. The first thing he noticed was the overpowering smell of rotting flesh. Street had to cover his mouth when he got into the hallway.

He saw a conference room, bathroom and another room filled with gray file cabinets. The front of the house was where Chuck Flynn met with his clients. Street saw a teak desk with a red leather chair behind it with two green leather upholstered chairs facing his desk and an antique grandfather clock in one corner.

Street stepped back when he saw the body. Chuck

Flynn was lying face up on the Persian rug with his hands by his side. Street walked around the body and looked at the face. There were cut wounds on his hands and arms. It looked as if Flynn tried to fend off his attacker. Street listened to the ticking of the clock while trying to steady his nerves.

He saw a bent picture frame on the floor surrounded by pieces of broken glass. The picture inside was missing and the safe on the wall was open. He walked over and looked inside. It was empty. There were papers scattered on the floor beneath it. He knelt down, gathered them up, folded them then put them in his back pocket.

The detective knew by the smell that the deceased expired a few days ago. He leaned over the body of Chuck Flynn. His shirt was half-open and covered in blood. Street pulled the fabric aside and stared at the X shaped carving on his chest. It was just like the one found on Scooter's body.

Street had seen enough. He went to the bathroom and removed a washcloth from a holder on the side of the sink trying to remember if he had touched anything besides the doorknob. He wiped it off and opened the door. Then he kicked the door closed with his foot and cleaned the outside handle.

Street walked back up the side of the building, made a right turn to the front of the house and then walked up to the front using the cloth to open the gate. Street began walking at a quick pace down the into the heart of the city after closing the gate behind him,

He noticed the traffic on the street became heavier as he walked away from Brickstone Avenue. He found a coffee shop with a public phone outside and called Norman. He dialed the memorized number then asked the dispatcher for him specifically by name.

Street hung up went inside. He bought two donuts and a cup of coffee then waited out front for the taxi. Norman

pulled up to the shop as he was finishing his second donut. Street opened the back door and eased himself into the seat.

"I need you to take me over to the Cay Sal Bank as quick as you can, then wait outside until I come back," Street instructed.

Norman gave him a curious look through the rear view mirror and shrugged his shoulders. The red and yellow taxi sped down the streets of Freeport. He made it to the plaza in about five minutes and pulled right in front of the Cay Sal Bank.

"There is plenty more where that came from. I should be out in fifteen minutes," Street said handing him a twenty dollar bill.

Street walked to the front and opened the glass door and then walking directly to the customer service department. There he saw beautiful mulatto woman sitting behind a desk shuffling papers. She looked up at him and smiled. Street noticed her green eyes. They reminded him of sparkling emeralds.

"Where is your branch manager Mr. Wilcox?"

"He is not here. Maybe I can help you," Emerald eyes said.

"Who are you?" Street inquired.

"My name is Miss Clifton," She answered.

"I am Detective Street. A peace officer from The Homeland. I have to seize funds from the account of a fugitive from justice by the name of Chuck Flynn." Street said pulling out his identification badge. Miss Clifton looked at it.

"Let me give the Manager a call. I am sure we can help you with whatever you require," Miss Clifton explained.

She opened the drawers of her desk and removed a laminated sheet of paper listing the telephone numbers of the employees. Then she picked up the phone and started fingering the numbers.

The detective studied her. He noticed her beautiful skin

and thought her eyes glittered like gems. She was wearing a light pink blouse and a white skirt. There was a gold bracelet around her left wrist and the scent of flowers surrounded her. Street's head swirled as he breathed in the perfumed air.

Wilcox's wife picked up the phone after it rang at the residence.

"Hello," She said in a tired voice.

"Good morning Mrs. Wilcox. This is Miss Clifton down at the bank. Can I speak to your husband please?"

"Hold on a minute dear," She said.

Wilcox picked up the phone with one hand. The other held a piece of whole-wheat toast smothered in butter and lemon curd.

"Why are you calling me here Cynthia?" Wilcox said after swallowing a portion.

"Sorry to bother you at home Mr. Wilcox. I have a peace officer from The Homeland here at the bank. He says he wants to take charge of an account," Miss Clifton explained. Wilcox's eyes went wide.

"Damn I forgot. Tell him the legal department has to have him fill out some the paperwork. It will not be ready until Thursday or Friday. Tell him the delay is unavoidable," Wilcox said apologetically.

"I will let him know," Miss Clifton said assuring him.

"What do you say we go to the club for a few drinks after work on Friday and maybe a relaxing swim?"

"Mr. Wilcox. You should be ashamed of yourself. What would your wife think? You know I am seeing someone and he is a jealous man," Miss Clifton said warning him.

"Just pass the message and I will see you at work tomorrow. Goodbye Miss Clifton," Wilcox said before finishing his toast. Miss Clifton hung up the phone and looked at Street blushing slightly.

"Mr. Wilcox wants you to leave any necessary papers with me. Everything you need to sign should be ready on

Friday. He said the delay cannot be avoided," Miss Clifton informed him.

Street did not want to part with any documents unless he hand delivered them to Wilcox himself. He wanted no third party interference.

"Is Mr. Wilcox coming to work tomorrow?" Street asked her.

"Yes he is," Miss Clifton replied.

"I will be here bright and early to give him the papers personally. It is not that I don't trust you, but it would be my behind if they were lost or something got screwed up," Street explained.

"I understand," Miss Clifton said.

"Thanks for your help," Street said kindly.

"Have a nice day Mr. Street," Emerald eyes said smiling at him.

Street got up from the chair and walked out of the bank while the taxi parked a short distance away. He went over to the driver's window, reached in his pocket then gave Norman another twenty dollars.

"Drive me back to the motel. I still have to eat breakfast," Street informed him.

"Breakfast always taste better in the Bahamas," Norman replied without hesitating.

"What do the call you on the mainland?"

"Street. My name is Travis Street," He said.

"Take it easy Mr. Travis Street. Norman take you for a ride down to the beach road and then back to the motel. Maybe we see some pretty girls in bikinis along the way. There is nothing nicer than a fine woman in a bikini, accept one that don't need one. Yeah Mon. You know what I am saying?" Norman asked him.

Street laughed while he climbed into the back seat.

"You don't mind if I smoke a spliff?" Norman asked.

"Enjoy yourself," Street replied.

It was not long before the sweet pungent smell of reefer filled the taxi. It had been a long time since Street smelled weed. The last time he smoked reefer was in college. He always liked it. He reminded himself that the Violent Crimes Unit never administered urinalysis tests.

"You want to try a little bit?" Norman asked him.

"Sure. Why not?"

Street pinched the joint between his fingers. He took the hit inhaling the smoke deep into his lungs. The gas expanded and he coughed it out. He waited a few moments then took another. His eyes watered and then he felt as if his lungs would burst. His thoughts disappeared as he exhaled. Street's perception of time stretched like salt water taffy into the unexplored corners in his mind

"All right now Travis?" Norman asked.

"Yeah everything is fine," Street replied slowly.

He was high as a jumping sailfish when he got back to the motel. Street grinned while exiting the taxi. Street paid Norman with a twenty-dollar bill and told him to keep the change. He stumbled pass the desk back to his room finally collapsing on the bed.

He woke up around five in the afternoon. His first thought after he regained consciousness was of food. He called over to the bar and ordered a grouper sandwich, conch fritters and a side of coleslaw along with two beers to wash it down.

Street ate his meal on top of the desk in his room. When the meal was finished he wondered if he should call the police, then remembered what Gordy had said about involving the locals. Chuck Flynn's body indicated a homicide. Marty Styles was now a suspect more than ever.

Street picked up a conch fritter and dipped into the shrimp cocktail sauce. The horseradish in the sauce burned the inside of his mouth. He took a sip of beer and then wiped his hands with a napkin. Then he stood up, walked over to the television and pushed the power button. The

screen came to life. He surfed through the channels until he found the local news.

A distinguished Bahamian man wearing a white shirt, pink tie and sky blue blazer was sitting behind a desk reading from a piece of paper.

"A delegation from The Homeland walked out of the New World Summit today after the ambassador from Iranastan denied responsibility for the attack on the Triple Towers."

An attractive woman casually walked over to the announcer handing him a fresh sheet of paper just off the teletype. Michael Andros read it relaying the breaking news.

"A report has just come in to the news station that a body has been found on Brickyard Avenue in Freeport. Abigail Toffee is reporting live from that location. Go ahead Abby." Andros informed the viewers.

Street took the last bite from his sandwich standing up as the feed came over the screen. Street watched the screen with keen interest as he picked up the bottle and took another sip. A woman in a green skirt and yellow top was holding a microphone. The law office was behind her. There was yellow police tape around the front gate. A crowd of bystanders and several squad cars were surrounding the reporter.

"I am standing in front of the law office of Styles and Flynn where a body was found this afternoon by a postal carrier noticing a foul odor. The police will not release the identity of the victim until the next of kin have been notified," Abigail Toffee reported. She paused for a moment as the coroner walked behind her rolling a collapsible stretcher carrying a body covered with a maroon velvet blanket.

"Channel Nine computer records show that the firm is based in Key West. It handles international clients doing business throughout the Bahamas. The body will go to

Freeport General for evaluation by the Medical Examiner to determine if there was indeed a homicide. This is Abigail Toffee reporting to you live." She said confidently. The feed ended and the camera view returned to Andros sitting at his desk at the news station.

"Thank you for that report Abby. Now for some news from around the islands. Johnny Peale from the national cricket squad was allegedly involved in a plot to fix matches during last year's tournament with Barbados. The report claims Peale took bribes from a crime syndicate operating out of a downtown casino," Andros said as if disappointed with the report.

Street sat back down on the chair by the desk and propped his feet on the bed. Michael Andros was a capable newscaster with a decade of experience who felt as comfortable at a news desk as a Seminole Indian wrestling an alligator.

"The Secretary of Trade announced that there will be a three year ban on conch and lobster exports from the Bahamas due to contamination. A study from a leading Caribbean University indicates that last year's oil spill contaminated marine products at the source.

The Secretary is also prohibiting the sale of conch and lobster products in all restaurants throughout the islands. Bahamian fisherman and restaurant owners will be holding a protest in front of the Trade Office tomorrow," Andros explained.

Street thought about the fish sandwich he just ate wondering if he might get sick. He picked up his beer and gulped several swallows hoping to dilute any traces of oil. The cool carbonated liquid felt good as it slid down his throat.

He set the can down, then reached for the rum bottle on the table. He took the bottle out of the brown paper bag and opened the cap then lifted it to his lips and took a long pull. Meanwhile; Andros was smiling into the camera as he

began reading the next story.

"Tropical Storm Domino is gathering strength in the Atlantic. The storm should become a hurricane tomorrow. The forecast track may affect the out islands of the Bahamas within two days. Currently the storm is located just south of Grand Turk. There are already tropical storm warnings in the Turks and Caicos Islands," Andros reported.

Street turned off the television disgusted. Chuck Flynn was dead and everyone in the Bahamas knew it. He had to get to Wilcox and get that money. He reached into his back pocket for the papers from Flynn's office then read the last Will and Testament of Chuck Flynn.

CHAPTER 20

Marty Styles felt exhausted. It was almost midnight and he had a long boat ride ahead of him the next morning. The Delilah was all ready for the trip from Key West to Freeport. His route would take him up the coast to Miami and then across the Gulf Stream to the Bahamas. He took a shower then crawled into bed. The silk sheets felt good on his body after the difficult day. Styles drifted to sleep thinking about bone fishing the flats on quiet mornings.

His peaceful slumber was of short duration. He heard the sound of metal chains downstairs. Initially he thought it was his imagination, but then the sound became louder as it came closer. Chains were bumping on the steps now with a thumping sound. The links were hitting the wood like a piece of pipe on a dead tree.

Marty Styles was shaking and he had an empty feeling in his stomach. He knew something bad was coming and there was not a damn thing he could do about it. The sound of the chains was upstairs now getting closer by the second.

Metal links began hitting the carpet in the upstairs hallway with a dull thud. When he reached for the telephone the sound of the chains stopped. Marty put the receiver to his ear and dialed. A woman with a New York accent answered the call.

"What is your emergency?" The dispatcher asked.

Styles could barely speak. His throat was dry and his tongue felt swollen. He forced out the words. His voice was ragged and barely audible. The operator at the police station looked at the address on the computer screen.

"My name is Styles. There is an intruder in my house," Styles informed her.

"Did you say you had an intruder in your house? I am going to send a squad car right over. Stay on the line," The

dispatcher said.

Marty dropped the phone when the bedroom door opened. A dark shadow moved across the floor. Styles started kicking at the sheets trying desperately to get away. A man was standing at the foot of the bed holding a knife high above his head.

Marty attempted to shield his head from the incoming blow then felt the warm sticky liquid running down onto his chest as the blade came down repeatedly. He felt his body getting colder as his life started slipping away.

Outside the sound of sirens echoed through the night. A lone police car pulled into the driveway. The red, white and blue lights flashed an eerie patriotic glow on the lawn. The two female officers notified dispatch they were on scene then they requested backup.

Officers Leslie Wagner and Kendra Slayde of the Margarita County Police Department exited their squad car with their weapons drawn. They proceeded through the front door into a dark living room. Slayde found the switch and turned on the lights. Wagner hollered out for him.

"Mr. Styles are you here?" She said.

There was no answer. The only sound was that of a ceiling fan spinning in the kitchen. Wagner scanned the room, listening while looking for movement.

"I don't like it. Let's wait for back up," Wagner said

Slayde was the kind of woman that liked to shoot first and ask questions later. She moved forward towards the kitchen ready to go while Wagner was pointing her gun to the floor.

"Hold on a minute," Wagner said. She reached around to the small transmitter on the shoulder tab of her uniform and pushed the button.

"151 to dispatch," Wagner said into the microphone.

"Go ahead 151," The dispatcher replied.

"We are still waiting on that backup," Wagner said.

"Car 57 is in route," The voice said.

"10-4. Copy that," Wagner replied.

Wagner and Slayde both heard a terrible scream from a room above them. The two officers ran up the stairs. They heard movement in a room on the right at the end of the hall then another scream. Wagner and Slayde were next to the bedroom door now with their backs against the wall.

"Are you ready?" Wagner asked Slayde.

"Let's do this," Slayde replied.

Wagner reached for the doorknob, turned it then kicked the door open. She looked into the room and saw a man on the bed straddling the victim. Styles had his shirt off under him and a man was carving into his chest with a steak knife.

Wagner fired twice hitting the suspect in the back. Then Slayde opened fire with a barrage of bullets as Wagner continued firing, both officers emptying their clips into the killer. The man rolled off the body and fell dead on the floor with the knife still in his hand as the room filled with smoke from the discharged weapons.

Downstairs the second patrol car had already arrived on scene. The officers were already in the living room when they heard the shots.

"Leslie where are you?" Officer Mack yelled.

"I am up here," Wagner replied.

The officers ran up the stairs. They both saw the bloody mess on the bed as they entered the room. Slayde and Wagner were standing over the dead man with their weapons still in their hands. The smell of the gun powder was strong while white smoke lingered in the air.

"Are you two alright? What the hell happened?"

"You are looking at it. We caught this psycho cutting into that dead guy like a pork chop with that knife so we let him have it," Officer Wagner said.

"Yeah; we pumped that psycho full of hot lead," Slayde replied.

Officer Walls walked over to the side of the bed

examining the wounds on the killer. He recoiled when he saw the blood oozing from the bullet wounds on the chest.

"I think you should take a look at this Mack," Officer Walls said.

Mack went to the bed and leaned closer to examine the body of Marty Styles. He saw a clean incision on the neck. The sheets were stained crimson from the blood already soaking through the mattress. He saw the shape of the letter X carved into his chest.

"He's dead," Mack asserted

"I'd say so. Let's get the medics over here to pronounce him then maybe we can get out of here before the sun comes up," Officer Mack said looking back down at the body remembering something. He examined the bullet holes and then the mark on the torso. Mack stared at it for a few moments finally realizing the significance.

"That looks like a letter X. You both just shot the Lighthouse Killer. You ladies will get a medal for this," Mack said to the others. Wagner did not care. She was already grumbling about the paperwork to follow while heading for the stairs.

"I'm going to catch a smoke and call the chief. Try not to step all over our crime scene. I will be up all night buried in paperwork," She complained.

Mack walked back over to Slayde standing several feet away with an empty look in her eyes. He put his hand gently on her shoulder.

"Why don't you go downstairs with Leslie? We will take it from here. You have been through enough tonight," He said trying to console her. Officer Slayde felt sick to her stomach as she looked over at Styles lying there dead on the bed.

"I need a little air that's all," Slayde admitted.

She slowly walked out the bedroom door while officer Walls searched the killer's pockets for identification. He did not find any.

CHAPTER 21

Norman picked Street up at the motel at ten the next morning and drove him to the Cay Sal Bank. Street told him he would catch the bus back to the hotel after he finished his business. Street walked into the bank. He smelled roses when he got a few feet from the door. It was the scent of the carpet freshener sprinkled on the floor. He could see Miss Clifton was in her office when he went to the door of the customer service office and knocked.

"Good Morning. Is Mr. Wilcox here?"

"Yes he is," Miss Clifton replied.

"Could you please give these to him?" Street asked handing her the papers to seize the Styles & Flynn account.

"I will come back for them on Friday," Street added.

There was another knock on the door frame behind him before she could answer.

Willy Wilcox was standing there. Wilcox was wearing a white short-sleeved shirt, gray pants and a black tie. He was almost bald, except for patches of silver hair on the sides of his head.

"Mr. Wilcox. This is Travis Street. He is the policeman I told you about on the phone yesterday," Miss Clifton explained. Street turned around then extended his hand. Wilcox grabbed it shaking it vigorously.

"Wilcox is the name. I'm at your service."

"Glad to know you," The detective said.

"Mr. Street has the necessary papers to assume control of the Styles and Flynn account," She said. Wilcox instantly appeared concerned.

"There is a bit of a problem with that particular account," Wilcox confessed.

"What kind of problem?" Street asked.

"The Chief of Police called me an hour ago. All of Mr.

Flynn's assets are now frozen pending the outcome of the investigation into his death."

"He's dead!" Street said acting surprised.

"Poor chap passed away yesterday in his office. A victim of foul play no doubt. The police found his body last night. It was all over the news," Wilcox explained.

"Can I have those documents back please?" Miss Clifton handed the papers back to him.

"Well I guess that concludes our business. It was nice meeting you Mr. Wilcox," Street said regretting he could not get what he wanted at the bank.

"Sorry we could not be of more assistance. Goodbye Mr. Street," Wilcox added. Cynthia smiled as she watched him leave.

"Would you please accompany me to the safety deposit box room? I need a witness present while I inventory the Flynn box?" Wilcox requested.

She stood up from her desk. The two walked across the lobby towards the stairway leading downstairs. The boxes were behind a heavy cage and an impressive vault door. There were two large mahogany tables in the middle of the floor each surrounded by four wooden chairs.

"Mr. Flynn's box is A-11," Wilcox said nervously.

The two walked over to the wall of boxes opposite the door. Wilcox took out a key from his pocket and the master key from a chain that he wore around his neck. The Flynn box was closer to the floor and was the largest dimension available. He had to kneel down to insert the keys turning them together to open the lock.

Wilcox pulled the rectangular box out from the wall then stood up. The container was as long as two shoe boxes placed end to end. The weight of it pulled his arms downwards to the floor. His arms strained as he carried it to the tables. The contents shifted inside with a metallic clanking when he set it down.

When Wilcox opened the lid the first thing he saw was

his distorted reflection in the chrome of the 357 Magnum. He also saw a roll of documents tied with a string along with three passports under the weapon on top of a black cloth.

The Bahamian and Homeland passport belonged to Flynn. The other was Russian belonging to a client of his named Sergei Rostov. He saw gold coins when he moved the cloth aside. Wilcox was pleased with her reaction.

"Do you know what the price of gold is today?"

"No I don't," Miss Clifton admitted.

"It is over a thousand dollars an ounce. That means just one of those coins is worth two grand. There has to be hundreds of them here. We are looking at a fortune. I have a proposition for you. I will give you three coins from that box if I can have you on that table right now," Wilcox promised.

"What if someone comes down here while were in the middle of it?" Cynthia asked him.

"I guess they will be in for quite a show," Wilcox replied.

"Make it five and you can do whatever you want to me," Miss Clifton said.

Wilcox reached into the box and counted out the coins then handed them over. Clifton put the coins in the front pocket of her slacks.

"What about your wife?" She asked.

"What she don't know won't hurt her," Wilcox told her.

"This is what you really want?"

"Yes. More than anything," Wilcox said convincingly.

"Well let's get on with it," She said.

Cynthia began removing her clothes while Wilcox shut the steel door from the inside. All they could hear was the sound of the air conditioner humming through the vents.

Their session began on the mahogany table and then went over to the chairs. It went on for fifteen minutes. Their grunting and groaning was primeval. Cynthia thought

old Willy would have a heart attack in the middle of it. He had not felt so naughty in at least twenty years. They put their clothes back on when they were finished.

"This gold does not exist. Do you understand? The log will show there was only the documents, passports and the pistol. This is our secret. Keep your mouth shut and I will make sure you get your fair share of the coins. I want you to spend the weekend with me so we can pick up where we left off. My wife is out of town," Wilcox explained while looking directly into her eyes.

"I am not going to be your whore," Cynthia answered before considering the proposition.

"I never said you were. Just think about my offer," Wilcox replied.

The two of them straightened themselves up. Mr. Wilcox left the room for two minutes and returned with a burlap coin bag. He dumped the bag of coins from the box in the sack then put the passports back on top of the revolver and closed the lid. Then he slid the metal box back into the wall and locked it using the two keys. They both looked at each other before they went upstairs.

"I can't believe we are doing this," Cynthia said.

"Believe it baby," Wilcox answered.

The coins jingled in her pockets as Cynthia walked back to her desk. She reached her hand inside it to silence them. They felt good in her hand growing warm as she fondled them. She had never had so much gold in her life and the thought of it was turning her on.

Wilcox walked into the parking lot several minutes later with a briefcase holding the burlap sack. He looked around the parking lot cautiously before getting into his car placing it next to him on the passenger seat. Then he started the car and drove away heading towards his house on the coast.

Miss Clifton watched Wilcox leave from the bank window. She left her desk to go after him then ran to her car, opened the door, started the engine and began

following him. It took them twenty minutes to get to lighthouse on the other side of the island. He parked in front of a shack next to the tower.

Clifton pulled over then watched Wilcox get out and open the trunk. He took something from the toolbox and put in his back pocket. Then she saw him open the car door and take out briefcase with the sack of coins. He carried it over to the base of the light struggling with the weight.

He opened the door with a skeleton key. Wilcox shut the door behind him and climbed the metal spiral staircase. When he reached the top he unscrewed the metal base plate on the lens stand and placed the case carefully behind the motor that turned the light. Then he screwed in the brass bolts with a wrench sealing the gold behind the metal barrier.

Wilcox looked out the window towards the harbor when the task was completed. He thought about Cynthia for a moment and pondered whether he could divorce his wife and run away with her. He was just about to climb back down the stairs when he heard the door below creak then slam shut at the bottom of the stairwell with a resounding boom.

The top of the lighthouse became silent for several moments then Wilcox heard the sound of chains clanking on the spiral metal stairs. He looked down over the railing, but could not see anything. The sound of the chains was getting louder as the footsteps got closer. Now the clanging was all around him echoing inside the tower.

The circular chamber at the top filled with a cold eerie mist. Wilcox shivered as a blue apparition appeared in a swirling cloud for a moment then vanished. He thought he saw Cynthia's face in the fog for a second then it was gone.

Wilcox felt a tremendous force push him against the curved brick wall. His head slammed against the bricks and his body rose from the ground then was thrown against the ceiling. He cried out as he was dropped back to the ground

with a thud.

"I'm sorry. Please don't hurt me," Wilcox begged while putting up his hands in front of his face. Then he felt a sharp pain in his chest like an icy cold dagger piercing his heart. He was already dead when Cynthia threw him out the window. His body landed on the ground below the tower with a dull thud. His lifeless corpse contorted into a bloody horrific pose as his blood spilled onto the asphalt roadway leading to the base of the structure.

Cynthia ran down the spiral staircase in a panic then outside past the body. She could not remember anything that happened while the spirit was inside her body controlling her. She ran quickly to her car fumbling for the keys before opening the door.

Then she looked back up towards the lighthouse. Clifton saw mist coming out of the broken window and heard an eerie laughter. The air around her smelled of static electricity as the hair on the back of her neck stood up. The goose bumps came right before everything went black.

CHAPTER 22

Street sat down on the side of the bed and kicked off his shoes. He called the Director when he got back to the motel. McGregor was on his way out when he picked up the phone. He was on his way to a nearby deli on the verge of a pastrami sandwich on rye bread covered with horseradish with a side order of potato salad.

"McGregor here," The Director answered.

"This is Street down in Freeport Sir."

The Director reached for the chair in front of his desk. McGregor was anxious to get the information so he could go to lunch.

"I was just about to call you Street. I need you back in Key West right away. Gordy will fly you out in the morning," The Director informed him.

"I can't leave now. The airport is closed. Chuck Flynn is dead. The Lighthouse Killer got him. The police have frozen his account and I can't get the money wired. Things are all messed up down here. There is a hurricane coming."

"I guess you have not heard with everything going on there?"

"Heard about what?"

"There is an epidemic in Key West. Some sort of bird flu. Did you say Flynn was murdered?" McGregor asked while looking at a photograph he took out of Flynn's office. It was a picture of Chuck Flynn with him on a dock in Freeport proudly displaying the day's catch.

"Listen up Street. They are shipping out the infected population. This case is bigger than I thought. You need to get back here and contact Major Flak. Brief him on this Kitty Nova character. We are handing over the Jones file to the military. The case is now under their jurisdiction. They consider the whole burrito a matter of National Secrecy," McGregor explained.

Street felt the need to protest. He had put a significant amount of time in the case and did not want someone else taking the credit for the arrest.

"The Bahamians are already processing Flynn's body," Street informed him.

"Forget about that. I will call the embassy down there and let them take care of it. Just get your ass on a plane. Write up your report then give a copy to Major Flak and fax me the original over a secure line," McGregor instructed.

"What about Scooter's killer?" Street inquired.

The Director did not like it when agents questioned his authority. He thought Street was hesitant about his instructions.

"Listen to me Street. Maybe I did not make myself clear. Flak is the big cheese now as far as this case is concerned. What he says goes. I have a memo here from him assigning you to his command until further notice. You are going back to Key West to assist him with gathering intelligence whether you like it or not," McGregor ordered.

"Yes Sir." Street replied reluctantly conceding with the order. He did not like the turn of events one bit. The Director sensed the submission in his voice. He offered him another piece of information to distract him away from the subject of his reassignment.

"Can you believe they are going to induct the viral carriers into the armed services? My best guess is that they are going to use them as part of a bio-weapon platoon," The Director explained.

"Sir I am not sure I understand," Street said confused. McGregor stood up checking his watch

"The military is enlisting the people with the virus. I have to go to lunch. Just be on that plane tomorrow. They caught the killer with knife in hand. The cops shot him as he was carving into Marty Styles." McGregor explained.

"You are kidding me. Who is it?"

"We don't know yet. He did not have any identification on him when the cops ventilated him. I have to go. I will tell you all about it when I debrief you," McGregor said.

"I found Flynn's body. He had the same artwork on his chest here as Scooter Jones at the lighthouse," The detective said.

"You don't say. Well our cutter can't be in two places at once. There has to be a copycat killer somewhere. Either he is up here or down there with you," McGregor surmised.

"So what's our next move?" Street asked.

"The powers that be will go with the one here. A killer in jail here is better than one we can't find in Freeport," The Director said jokingly. "You got anything else?"

"Flynn left his money to Kitty Nova," Street told him.

"That figures. She was the good time girl for damn near everyone in Key West. I have to go Street. See you soon," McGregor said concluding the call.

"Goodbye Sir." Street replied.

McGregor hung up the phone. He liked Street. He was sharp, but he would never get wise to the fact that his own boss was a killer. Flynn and Styles were dead because they got greedy. McGregor took the ferry from Nassau over to Freeport and took care of everything.

Street picked himself off his bed, walked over to the television and then turned it on. It was noon and Michael Andros was back at the desk. This time he was wearing a yellow coat, white shirt and a multicolored tie. He smiled into the camera as if he was promoting toothpaste in a commercial.

"Good afternoon ladies and gentleman. Here are the main headlines. Hurricane warnings are posted throughout the islands as Tropical Storm Domino has been upgraded to a hurricane. The airport is already closed and the Army is on alert. The sale of liquor is banned throughout the islands until the state of emergency has been lifted by the Prime Minister," Andros reported.

Street poured himself a shot in one of the plastic cups next to the ice bucket. His rum reserve was a quarter empty. He thought it was just enough to get him through the storm. Meanwhile Andros picked up another piece of paper from the news desk.

"The body found yesterday at the office of Styles & Flynn has been identified as Chuck Flynn. Mr. Flynn was a foreign national doing business in the Bahamas. He also is a successful restaurant owner with a chain of fried chicken outlets in the Bahamas and the Florida Keys. Police still do not know if Flynn was the victim of foul play. The cause of death has yet to be determined by the Medical Examiner," Andros said. He turned the news sheet over and picked up another piece of paper smiling once again into the camera.

"An island off the Florida has been quarantined by the Governor to prevent the spread of a suspected epidemic. Governor Burros has issued a state of emergency and banned travel to and from Key West. The popular tourist destination is now under the control of the National Guard as precautionary measure." Andros said continuing with his report.

"The protest in front of the Trade Office by conch and lobster fisherman has been canceled due to the impending threat of Hurricane Domino. The march was scheduled after the Secretary announced that fish and crustacean exports would be banned due to contamination from a large oil spill in the Gulf of Central America last summer."

Street had heard enough. He turned off the television after he remembered that he did not have any hurricane supplies. He called Norman to come pick him up. Street poured himself another shot in a plastic cup while he waited.

The red and yellow taxi pulled up to the hotel twenty minutes later. Stormin Norman was not there. Instead his friend Ned was driving. Street opened the front passenger door and got inside. Ned smiled at him when he did.

“Where is Norman?” Street asked.

“Stormin has the day off. He is getting his house ready. Do you know there is a storm coming?” Ned asked him.

“Yeah; I heard,” Street replied.

“Where are you going today?” Ned asked him.

“I need to get supplies in town,” Street replied.

“The sea bad angry now. My friend in the Caicos said his place got flooded. Told me his car was floating down the street like a boat. All the power is out and mosquitos are everywhere. My friend caught plenty fish before she come though and fry them up. At least he won't go hungry,” Ned explained.

Ned took coastal road back into Freeport to the only real supermarket on the island. It was located in a strip mall along with a pawn shop, eye clinic, hard ware store, book store, donut shop and bar.

“I need you to come back an hour after you drop me off. I want to buy a radio for the weather reports and get a bunch of other stuff,” Street told him.

Street was surprised that it looked like business as usual when the taxi arrived at the parking lot of the market. He thought the place would be a madhouse, but to his surprise, there were hardly any cars around.

“Why don’t you just help me get this stuff?” Street asked him.

“That should enough to cover your time,” He said giving him a twenty dollar bill.

“Appreciate that,” Ned said smiling as he took the money.

“Here is another twenty go over to the hardware store and find me a decent radio then meet me back at the car,” Street instructed politely.

They separated in the parking lot and Street walked towards the store. Once inside he found a cart and within a half hour they had a week's supply of food. He bought water, bagels, peanut butter, crackers, sardines, tuna, soup,

corned beef, candles, matches, bug spray, flashlights and batteries. Street paid for the items and pushed the cart back to the waiting taxi. Ned was already there with the trunk open. Street put the boxes inside then got into the back seat again. The radio was on the seat in a bag along with the batteries. He took it out and looked it over.

"Nice radio Ned. Keep the change," Street offered.

They both listened to the weather report on the radio during the ride back. The storm would be there within 24 hours. Ned helped him carry the boxes back to his room.

"Thanks for everything. Maybe I will see you later down at the Quarry," Street said to him when they were finished.

"You take it easy Travis," Ned replied.

"Maybe we get some girls and have a hurricane party. Meet Norman and me down at the Quarry around nine if you can. We are going to get high as a tarpon jumping," Ned said jokingly.

CHAPTER23

The band was playing a kinky reggae song and the air was filled with the pungent with smell of marijuana burning. The Quarry was filled to capacity when Street found Norman and Ned sitting with their girlfriends in a corner booth. He was just about to join them when he saw Cynthia Clifton across the room. Street watched her walked over to the bar. He casually walked over towards her.

"Hello Miss Clifton," Street said.

"What are you doing here?"

"It just so happens I am a big fan of reggae music," Street replied while looking deep into her eyes.

The bartender came over wearing a green tee shirt with dancing skeletons with dread locks on their skulls. The words "Quarry Bar" were spelled in white bones above the primitive art work.

"What can I get you two?"

"We are not together. I will have a double shot of cane rum and a stout," Miss Clifton said after rolling her eyes. The bartender smiled knowing Cynthia would get meaner as time went by once she started drinking. She was a regular and her boyfriend was a dangerous man.

Clifton's opinion of herself decreased dramatically since her session in the bank with Willy Wilcox. She felt degraded, wondering if a prostitute felt that way after servicing a client. She retreated to her apartment for a rest after Wilcox fell to his death. She was not sure what happened at the lighthouse when she woke up. Cynthia decided then it was a great time to get drunk. Hence her appearance at the bar that night.

"What about you?" The bartender asked him.

"Any beer will be fine," Miss Clifton replied.

Horace the bartender reached in the cooler for the beers

while Street looked at Cynthia. She was digging around in her purse looking for her pack of cigarettes. Street had the feeling something was wrong as she took the pack out along with a white lighter. She lit the cigarette and Street slid an ashtray on the bar over in front of her.

"Is everything alright Miss Clifton?" The detective inquired.

She turned to face him, lit the cigarette and blew the smoke over his head. Cynthia looked into his eyes, bothered with the question. She had the feeling he was trying to pick her up.

"Why wouldn't it be?" Miss Clifton responded with a tone of annoyance.

"I don't know. You seem a little distracted," Street responded.

"I'm fine. I just have a lot on my mind," Miss Clifton admitted.

The bartender opened two beers and set a glass on the bar in front of her then reached under the bar producing a bottle with a yellow and green label containing clear liquid. He opened the cap and poured a generous shot of sugarcane rum into a glass.

"That will be ten dollars," The bartender said smiling.

"Let me get that Miss Clifton," Street said wanting to pay.

"I buy my own drinks," She insisted.

"Please allow me. It is the least I can do," Street said.

"Suit yourself Mr. Street."

He reached into his pocket and gave him a twenty. The bartender took the bill and walked away to get the change.

"There is no need to be on the defensive. My intentions are honorable," Street explained.

"Are going to put a ring on my finger? I think I am going to disagree with that last statement if you are not," She said wanting him to leave. Street leaned over close enough to smell her perfume on the nape of her neck then

whispered in her ear.

"Maybe somebody would if you were not such a bitch,"

Miss Clifton's was speechless as her jaw dropped open. Street did not wait for her reply. He took his beer and headed back to the table not waiting for his change. Then he got an idea.

"Can I borrow your date for a dance? I want to get that girl at the bar jealous," Street told him.

"I don't mind," Ned's date said.

Ned's girlfriend stood up and followed Street out to the dance floor. It was a calculated move to see if Miss Clifton might be interested. Cynthia was watching from the bar with his change as the two kept the beat with the music. She watched them both move towards the dance floor.

Cynthia felt jealous the moment she looked at the two of them together. She crossed her legs and blushed. Miss Clifton took a shot of rum, finished her beer then picked Street's money up from the bar

. She decided she did not want to be alone that night once the alcohol kicked into her system. She left the bar and walked over to the dance floor. Then she tapped Street's dancing partner on the shoulder and whispered in her ear.

"You don't mind if I take over?" Miss Clifton asked. The woman turned around letting go of Street's hand.

"Watch out for this one," Ned's date warned.

"I'll be careful," Cynthia replied.

"Why Miss Clifton I did not know you cared," Street said in jest.

"Maybe I do. Maybe I don't," She replied sarcastically.

She gave him a mischievous smile. Then she hit him with a sensual look of longing highlighted by her lustful green eyes. Men usually came running when she gave them that look. Street held his emotions in check as he pressed himself against her.

"I don't mind if you use me. Just don't tease me," Street

said jokingly. Cynthia pulled him closer as the band began playing a slow song. She was feeling more comfortable as each second passed as if lost in the moment holding onto him like it was their last dance. They looked at each other when the song was over, both knowing whatever was going happen later that night would be special.

"Can we go someplace and talk?" She asked.

"Let me say goodbye to my friends,"

The two walked back over to the table. Ned had just finished a joke about one of his taxi customers. The two women at the table with him were laughing hysterically.

"Thanks for the good time everybody," Street said to everybody.

"Are you leaving so soon?" Norman asked him.

"I'm tired and she has offered to give me a lift home before the rain comes. I'll be here for a while with this storm. We still have to go fishing once the wind dies down and the water clears up," Street reminded Norman.

They went outside and saw people still filing into the bar. The two went into the parking lot and stood by her car.

"There is a patio by the pool at the motel with some chairs. We can talk there if you like," Street explained.

"Please don't think I do this all the time. It's just that I would rather not be alone tonight," Miss Clifton confessed.

"You don't have to be alone. I am here for you," Street said reassuring her. She looked at him sensing that he meant well.

"You are so sweet," Miss Clifton replied.

They rode back to the motel without another word. The breeze smelled of the sea and the moon was bright in the night sky. The fronds on the palm trees were bending from the force of the growing wind as rain drops began splashing on the wind shield. They raced to the room just as the down pour started. Street lit some candles and turned on his new radio as the rain continued to fall.

CHAPTER 24

The National Guard trucks drove right to the dog track as soon as they arrived in Key West. The parking lot became the staging area for a contingent of military troops and medical investigators. Several olive green tents were erected to house the command center. They did not have long to wait for patients.

The first victim was a board member from one of Kitty's corporations. Candy Gilbers hired Kitty to add a little spice into her 10th anniversary party. She was found lying face down on the bedroom floor with blood seeping from her mouth, ears, nose and anus onto her expensive Persian carpet.

Her husband called the ambulance right away. The medics turned around and walked away when they saw the red spots on her arms. They radioed the dog track for quarantine instructions. The body was going to be removed by the hazmat team then dissected at the morgue.

Major Flak learned of the existence of Kitty's diary from Disease Control. Kitty cried as she told her story to a group of doctors in white lab coats after a dose of psychedelic drugs. Nova did not know that there was a video recorder behind the two-way mirror in her hospital room. The interview was recorded by the military.

Here is a brief excerpt from that interview. The names of those speaking have been deleted due to security protocols. The rest of the interview is still classified for reasons of National Secrecy.

An unspecified physician was convinced she was working for the Chinese as a walking, talking, biological delivery system for one of the most advanced infectious diseases ever devised by man. The military officers just wanted answers for their superiors no matter how they got

them. The brass also theorized she had been brainwashed so she would not remember her mission.

"How many people did you screw and infect with the virus?" The military doctor asked.

"I am not sure," Kitty replied.

"Tell us about the diary," The doctor asked.

"It is such a pretty green," Kitty answered.

"Where is the diary now?"

"In my red suitcase," Kitty responded.

"Are you working for the Chinese?"

"I work at Peek and Boo's Escorts. Everybody knows that," Kitty admitted.

"When is the next attack?" The doctor probed with the intention of confirming his presupposed conspiracy.

"I did not mean to hurt anybody. I was only trying to have some fun and make a buck. Where is the harm in that?"

"Who do you work for?"

"I told you already," Kitty complained."

"How much are the Commies paying you to spread your filth?"

The interrogation went on for hours. The brass considered flying her somewhere in the Middle East so she could be tortured properly. One officer wanted her extradited and assigned to a secret project involving hypnosis and pick pocketing but there were no openings in the class. The brass decided to keep her in isolation up in Knoxville until the heads of military intelligence decided what to do with her next.

Flak went over to Lazy Lizard Drive escorted by the military police. They found Kitty's Nova's red leather briefcase next to a pair of pink high heel pumps under the waterbed. He opened the case and pulled out the plastic divider that separated the toy vegetables from the bottom of the case. The diary was gone. It did not take long for the Major to figure out where it went.

Major Flak and two of his guards paid a visit to Judge Ryan next in the middle of the night and made him open his safe. He was reluctant at first but complied with their request after a rifle butt to the forehead. They knocked him out cold and threw him in the brig with a bump the size of a mouse.

The next day the names and addresses in the diary were faxed to the military police at key defensive positions around the island. Major Flak immediately upgraded the biological threat status of the island from level three to four and then contacted the Governor. He declared a state of emergency and a quarantine of the island. All residents lost their Basic Rights once the decree was signed. The round ups and internment of the infected began.

Subsequent orders from the Octagon went to Major Flak at the track. All those with the rooster pox would be collected and incarcerated at the Outer Hold. A hospital ship disguised as a cruise ship would transfer them later to a frozen outpost near the Arctic Circle. The ship was due at the cruise ship terminal in two days.

The infected carriers were destined for a life in military custody. The data collected from their interrogations would become the basis for Major Flak's color-coded list. The carriers were now all considered test subjects under the scrutiny of The Homeland in the interest of National Secrecy.

Major Flak was standing in the command tent staring at a map of Key West on a fold out table. He had a red magic marker in his hand and was busy locating the carriers by their street address marking the locations with the marker.

The map had dozens of red dots. There was one for each entry in Kitty's diary. A body count of about thirty people was expected before the outbreak subsided. Then work would begin rounding up those on the Major's Red List.

A chubby radio operator with dirty blonde hair was

sitting several feet away from the Major. He took off his headset and called over to him in a nervous tone.

"I have an incoming call from Doctor Spiff at Community Relations," The radioman said. The Major snatched the receiver from his hand.

"Major Flak here," He said.

"This is Dr. Spiff in Knoxville. Is this a secure line?"

"Yes," The Major replied.

"Sir we have a bit of a problem. Seems that bird virus is one of ours. We invented it," Dr. Spiff admitted.

"I'll be damned," Flak replied.

"Some of our boys were doing bio-weapons experiments several years ago. They came up with a potent virus then sprinkled it on some hostiles as part of biological experiment. Sorry about that," Dr. Spiff apologized.

"Why would they do that?" Flak asked the doctor.

"You are not going to like it," Dr. Spiff replied.

"There were a particular set of rebels in the desert denying our boys oil concessions in the Middle East some fifty odd years ago. I think you can connect the rest of the dots," The doctor explained.

"My superiors think there is a way to keep the outbreak in check. The Caribbean version of the lion fish has a chemical inside that stops the replication of the virus. It is from the same family as those found in the Red Sea," The doctor said.

He then continued with his assessment of the situation. "They discovered a way to cure the disease when the scientists realized the coastal inhabitants eating lion fish were immune to the virus," Spiff elaborated.

"Well that is good news. All I have to do now is have my troopers take a dive into the ocean and fetch me up some of them spiny bastards," The Major replied being sarcastic.

"It's alright Doctor. I think a couple of the troops can rustle me up some lobsters and conch for dinner. I'll tell

them to throw in a couple of lion fish for good measure so we can run a little experiment instead of sipping margaritas this afternoon. Is that all you have for me?" Major Flak asked.

"Yes Sir," Dr. Spiff replied.

"Stay in touch Doc and call me if you have anything else that might make my job a little easier then give me a call," Major Flak said.

"I will; thank you Major." Dr. Spiff said.

Major Flak gave the phone back to the radio operator. Then he walked over to the Executive Officer's desk and handed him a list of orders for the next day from Lieutenant Colonel Canyon that were not negotiable.

His instructions specified that the roundups of the contagious persons would continue until further notice. The carriers are to be held under military guard at the cruise ship terminal until the containment vessel arrives.

Captain Grimes would be responsible for retrieving the lion fish along with six conchs and one dozen lobsters from local waters. Helicopter gunships would continue to circle the island so nobody attempted to flee south to Cuba and the number of guards posted at the Stock Island Bridge was doubled.

Samples of the rooster population would have to be collected and tested for the virus. The patrols would go out first thing in the morning. The radio operator at his desk was carefully monitoring the air waves for information for the Major. He raised his hand and signaled Flak.

"What is it boy?" Flak asked.

"A body has been found by one of the helicopter patrols. The state prosecutor is dead on his boat near Snipes Point," The radioman said.

The Major put a large wad of chewing tobacco in his mouth and began to chew. He spit on the dirt floor and walked over to Kitty's snakeskin diary on the table.

"What was that name again?" Major Flak asked.

“Max Coles,” The radioman replied.

The Major picked up the diary and then walked over to the radio operator with the communications gear. He flipped through the pages and found three entries with the name Max Coles. He reached into the front left top pocket of his uniform and pulled out his red magic marker.

“Ask them if there were spots on the body?” Flak requested.

The radio operator relayed the question to the Marine Patrol vessel on scene. Flak looked at his watch. It was 1745 hours. He drew a red line in Kitty's diary through the name Max Coles then shut the cover.

CHAPTER 25

The air in front of the command tent filled with blue smoke as the jeep entered the compound. Two beefy soldiers in dive skins hopped out. Their hair was still wet after an afternoon of foraging for lobsters and conchs in the waters off Key West. Major Flak was at the table studying his maps.

The soldiers walked over to him and stopped far enough away not to drip water on it. Then they saluted the Major in unison. The officer looked up at them and returned their salute.

"Privates Piling and Bickers reporting," Bickers said.

"Stand easy Privates," Major Flak replied.

"Sir we have the items you requested," Piling said proudly as he held up two mesh bags dripping sea water.

"Get those conchs and lobsters over to the kitchen on the double. Tell the cook to make some of those conch fritters. I have heard plenty about them and I want to find out what all the fuss is about," The Major ordered.

"Yes Sir," Bickers replied.

The Privates both saluted the Major again, then did an about face leaving the tent. The Major could almost taste the lobster and conch fritters and the cold beer he was going to drink. He checked his watch. It was 4:45 pm and he wondered where he might find some cocktail sauce for the fritters. Private Piling came back into the tent and walked up to the Major saluting him once more.

"What about the lion fish?"

"Damn; I nearly forgot. Get them over to the medical tent. Then I want you to go out to the supermarket and get me some cocktail sauce, three cases of beer and a fifth of "Stray Dog" whiskey," The Major said reaching into his pocket retrieving a hundred dollar bill. He handed the

carefully folded bill to the Private.

"You can keep the change, but I want you back here in thirty minutes or less. Do you read me?"

"Yes Sir. Thirty minutes,"

Private Piling saluted the Major then went back outside. He walked over to the chow tent with the mesh bags. Ronald the cook was inside when he got there. He looked at him suspiciously when he handed him the bag.

"What the hell you want me to do with these?"

"The Major wants you to boil these lobsters and make conch fritters out of the conchs," Piling said.

"What's a conch fritter?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Piling replied.

"I know how to cook a lobster, but I never seen one of these pink things and I never heard of a fritter," Ronald admitted.

"I guess the fritters comes from inside the shell. You might try shaking them out," Piling suggested.

"You figure it out. I have to go get some booze and cocktail sauce for the Major. Catch you later," Private Piling said as he left the tent.

Ronald shrugged his shoulders wondering how long he should boil the lobsters and how to get the fritter out of the shell. The shell was bigger than any oyster or a clam that he ever saw. He guessed the fritters were inside and that he could boil them out like the lobsters.

He walked over to a table with a bunch of pots and pans then picked up two steel pots and filled them full of water from a large black plastic container. Then he emptied the mesh bags into the pots after separating the lobsters from the conchs.

Five minutes later mess Sergeant Mofo showed up from his trip into town to pick up vegetables from the grocery store. He looked into the pots smelling the boiling spices.

"You might try a little more seasoning on those bastards. Make sure you don't overcook them and throw in

some bay leaves while you are at it," The Sergeant said looking in the other pot noticing the shells.

"What the hell are you doing Ronald?" Mofo asked him.

"I'm going to boil them fritters out," Ronald declared.

"Get those damn conchs out of there. You got to clean the guts out first. My God you are an idiot," Mofo said.

"How the hell was I supposed to know?" Ronald replied.

"Why don't you ask someone before you screw my world up? You are as misguided as the brass and their missiles. Do I have to do everything around here myself?" Mofo asked him while taking the pot off the burner.

He picked the shells out of the pot with a pair of tongs putting them on the table then got a metal mallet from a box of cooking utensils. The Sergeant then proceeded to knock off the tops of the shells. He pulled out the innards and set them on a cutting board.

"You are some slimy sons of bitches," Mofo said to himself.as he began cleaning the meat out of the shell. Then he looked over at the Private.

"Make yourself useful and find out what the Major wants to do with these things," Mofo ordered.

Ronald was a few feet away pushing the lobsters around in the pot with a wooden spoon. The crustaceans in the bubbling froth were already changing color to a fiery orange.

The Private took off his apron and threw it on the table then made his way over to the command tent. He saw Captain Grimes on the way and saluted. The Captain returned the salute looking at the Private suspiciously.

"Do you know where Major Flak is Captain?" Ronald asked the Captain.

"What could a cook possibly want with the Major?" The Captain probed.

"Sergeant Mofo at the mess tent wants me to ask him

what he wants us to do with the conchs," Ronald answered.

"What's a conch?" Grimes inquired.

"It is a big shell that crawls around on the bottom of the ocean," Ronald informed him.

"I heard they ate those conch critter things around here," The Captain replied.

"So you think he wants me to make conch critters?"

"I think that would be a safe assumption," The Captain said convincingly.

Ronald saluted the Captain, turned around and walked back to the mess tent. He saw Sergeant Mofo attending to the lobsters on the burner.

"The Captain says for us to make conch critters," Ronald said. Sergeant Mofo looked up from the pot.

"He means conch fritters," Mofo replied.

"I am sure he said critters, "Ronald said.

"He means conch fritters. They are like corn fritters," Mofo explained.

"What are corn critters?" The Private asked.

"They are like hush puppies," Mofo responded.

"What's a shush puppy?" Ronald asked.

"You know something Ronald?" Mofo said.

"What's that Sarge?"

"You are the dumbest person I ever I met, but you know what?"

"What's that Sarge?"

"I am going to get you a promotion," Sergeant Mofo declared.

"Really!"

"That's right; because as dumb as you might be, you are getting smarter every time you ask a question. That shows me that dormant brain hidden in that dense skull of yours might be functional and willing to grow into the size of a peanut. That means there is still hope for you. Not like some of the officers around here. They think they know everything."

"Thanks Sarge. You are a swell guy," Ronald said.

"Why don't you come over here and stir this pot. I have to buy some bread crumbs so we can make the Major's critters. I mean fritters. Then *maybe* I will treat you to one of them lobsters. Meanwhile; just keep stirring that pot."

CHAPTER 26

It was a glorious morning at the greyhound track. The sky was free of clouds and the air smelled of sea grass. The troops assembled in the parking lot for their early morning formation in their shorts and sneakers waiting for the morning run. The platoon leaders stood in front waiting for the appearance of the Company Commander.

Major Flak arrived at the head of the formation with a bullhorn. He stepped up onto a milk crate. He liked having extra height over his men. Captain Grimes was standing at attention to his right with another man next to him in a pair of cutoffs, tee shirt and pair flip-flops to his left. He had a palm frond for a hat and there was a cardboard box at his feet. The three looked like they were about to receive medals at the Olympics.

"Good morning men," The Major said to the troops.

The response from the group was less than the roar the Major expected. The soldiers were either not awake or just unmotivated.

"I can't *hear* you," Flak said into the bullhorn.

"Good morning Major," The soldiers roared.

"That's better. I realize that most of you men are looking forward to our early morning run with great anticipation. However; Today I have something else in mind that will get you all the exercise you need. It will challenge your endurance like nothing you have ever experienced. You will be doing The Homeland a great service as well.

Today we are going on a rooster safari. So get ready for some real live action," Flak explained. He paused for several moments when he heard the roar of engines. Two fighter planes were taking off from the base a mile up the road.

"Our mission today is simple men. We are going to

collect as many roosters as we can. In order to catch these wily critters; we will utilize techniques perfected by some of the locals. I am going to let one of them get on with the demonstration without further delay," The Major said before stepping down from the milk crate.

A man in the palm frond hat picked up the crate revealing something wrapped up in green nylon cord. He lifted it up and unraveled it revealing a cast net of a type used around the island to catch bait. The Major watched the man intently.

"In order to complete the demonstration this outstanding young man will require a hat. You heard me a hat. Who is going to volunteer their hat for the demonstration? "The Major asked the troops.

The formation became silent. The soldiers learned in basic training never to volunteer for anything. Nobody was ready to part with their hat: The Major walked over to the one of the platoons and ordered a private standing in front to relinquish his cap. The soldier saluted and then complied with the order.

The local walked over with the net in one hand and picked up the hat. He then placed it on the concrete in front of the formation then stepped back several paces until he was five yards away. Then he prepared the net for casting after some fancy maneuvering with his hands. The net sailed through the air, .opening in a wide circle like a spinning pancake, landing on the ground with the center covering the hat.

"Well done," The Major said.

"Can anyone else here throw one of these damn things?" Flak asked the men. Four hands rose from the crowd of three hundred.

"You four go over to petty cash, get some money and go buy some more nets," The Major ordered. The soldiers put down their hands and left the formation.

"The patrols go out at 0900. The roundups will continue

until I am satisfied we have enough birds. The roosters go to the coop until the bio-weapons department inspects them and declares them free of the virus. The platoon collecting the most birds gets a three day pass, a case of beer and all the Captain Cluck's Deluxe Fried Chicken they can stomach. Your platoon leaders will be issuing surgical masks for the mission and latex gloves since we don't want you to get infected. Use them while handling the birds in question," Flak instructed.

One of the soldiers in the second row to his left had a question. He raised his hand waiting for the Major to acknowledge him.

"What is *your* problem soldier?" Flak asked him.

"What happens to the remaining roosters once we get the number we need?"

"The rest of the birds will be collected and their blood will be tested. All infected birds will be destroyed. Those others will be sold to Captain Cluck's Deluxe Fried Chicken and converted into nuggets. Proceeds will benefit the company in the form of a keg party," The Major informed the men.

The net tossing local returned the hat to the soldier and walked over to Major Flak and Captain Grimes. Then Major Flak lifted up his bullhorn once again.

"Company Attention!" The formation stood up straight and fell silent.

"Let's give this fine young man a round of applause. That was an excellent demonstration," Flak said.

The sound of whistling and clapping erupted in the formation. The man appreciated the show attempting a salute. Then put his cast net back in the crate. Flak spoke into his bullhorn again.

"There is no reason why you have to drive around the island chasing the birds. You are going to walk on your rooster safari. The next formation is at 1600 hours. Everybody gets a half hour lunch break in town at your

own expense. Don't forget to fill your canteens. I want my troops hydrated damn it. Squad leaders pick up your masks and gloves from supply. Company attention! You are dismissed," The Major said.

The Executive Officer felt uneasy. He wanted clarification on the extermination of the roosters since the orders might cause a problem with some of the local animal rights activists.

"Could I have a moment Sir?" The Captain requested.

"What is it Grimes?"

"Do you think it is a good idea to fry the rest of them roosters? I think we can use them for something. Maybe assign them to entertain the men," Grimes proposed. The Major thought about the suggestion for a moment. The idea intrigued him.

"Let me guess. You want to roast them in a barbecue?"

"No Sir; that was not my intention. I read that cock fighting was big in these parts once upon a time. How about reviving an old tradition? It might be great way to boost morale and break up the monotony. We could make a nice piece of change if we run a betting operation on the side," Grimes suggested.

The Major liked the idea and smiled. He pictured himself with a winning cock of his own. Then he thought that each squad could have their own fighting rooster. Flak imagined the winners of the tournament's contenders parading down Main Street in some sort of bird festival.

"Captain Grimes; I have worked with you for the past two years. We have been in combat and through a lot of crap. This is by far the best idea you have ever had," Flak said complimenting him.

"Thank you Sir," The Captain answered.

"That leaves us with one unanswered question. What do we do with all the hens?" The Major asked.

"That's easy. We keep them in cages to inspire the roosters during the fight. It will not take the roosters long to

realize why they are fighting. We are sitting on the hen that laid golden egg Major. Naturally we will have to charge admission," Grimes explained.

"I agree Captain Grimes. This is how it is going to play out. There will be one rooster per platoon. There are four platoons in my company. That makes four roosters. I will also enter a rooster myself. The numbers are perfect for a king of the hill type of event. Do you have any ideas for a location?"

"I was thinking of an empty pool," Grimes suggested.

"That is perfect. What about all the chicks around town," Flak asked him.

"I have an answer for that too," Grimes said. The Captain hesitated for a moment unsure if what he was about to say would sound cruel.

"Well let's have it. What is cooking in that skull?"

"Sir, the other day I saw some buzzards on the other side of the island. I watched them for a while and then I noticed there were other birds up in the sky too. I got a pair of binoculars and spotted several chicken hawks circling up in the sky with the buzzards.

We are at the start of raptor season down here Major. Every year chicken hawks migrate here from up North. I did some reading on this subject at the public library. I am willing to bet these hawks dine on the baby chicks.

We could devise a way to have a hawk swoop down on cue and grab a chick. A stunt like that would be a great diversion for the men and maybe even another money maker," The Captain explained. The Major lips curled into a mischievous smile.

"Captain Grimes: you are superbly diabolical," Flak said in a positive kind of way.

"Thank you Sir," The Captain replied

"Keep it up Grimes. You are becoming one sharp cookie. You might get a promotion if you keep thinking up schemes like these. I'll get back to you later with my

decision."

The Captain saluted the Major and then departed. Grimes proceeded to make his rounds of the perimeter while Flak went to the mess tent to secure another cup of coffee and two jelly donuts.

The patrols went out as ordered. The soldiers scoured the neighborhood for the elusive birds. The troops caught several roosters after a few hours of diligent effort. The four patrols caught eight roosters and ten hens before lunch. It did not take long for the roosters to learn to avoid the wranglers by hiding under the houses or up in the trees.

Major Flak spent the morning roaming the island in a jeep with his driver. He came across some soldiers sitting down at a bus stop adjacent to a parking lot before lunch. The driver drove the jeep up over the curb onto the sidewalk. The Major got out of and looked at his troops.

The soldiers were too exhausted to come to attention. Flak noticed they had not caught any roosters. The converted lobster trap at their feet was empty and the cast net was lying on the ground in a heap. He could tell by looking at them they had given up.

"What seems to be the problem gentleman?' Major Flak inquired asking nobody in particular. The soldiers stood up and came to attention then saluted the Major in unison. The ranking non-commissioned officer was a Corporal. He respectfully addressed the Major.

"Sir we have chased these birds all over God's creation. We just cannot catch any. We had some cornered in those bushes over there against the back of the building a while back but they got away," The Corporal explained.

"You will never make Sergeant if you don't start using your coconut Corporal. Your problem is you don't know how to think like a bird," The Major said. He looked at Corporal with disappointment in his eyes then pointed to the soldier closest to the net.

"Are you one of my wranglers?" Flak asked him.

"Yes Sir," The soldier replied hesitantly.

"Stand over there and make ready with that net. You others get in those bushes and flush them out. We will get them when they try to get away on the other side," Major Flak instructed.

The two men hesitated for a moment then meandered into the bushes making a ruckus by waving their arms and yelling. A few seconds later some birds came cackling out the other side.

A beautiful robust rooster with brown and white tail feathers came out first followed by three hens. The man with the net waiting on the other side let it fly. The net landed right on top of the first rooster with one of the men underneath as well. The other hens ran passed the wrangler then scattered cackling into the parking lot.

The captured rooster went berserk under the net. It lunged after the man with beak and claws. The man fell to the ground with the bird on top of him. The rooster went into a tornado like display of flapping wings, violent pecking and clawing with its beak and spurs. The man yelling under the net was in complete fear of his very existence. A woman hanging up clothes in her back yard heard him screaming a block away. The rooster put the fear of his maker into him.

"Get it off of me," Private Perry screamed.

The Major took one look at the bird under the net and knew he had found his rooster.

"Don't injure that bird. Get that rooster in the trap and make it snappy," The Major ordered.

The bird's wings were still flapping beneath the net as the man caught inside tried to get hold of it. The rooster finally became exhausted after several seconds of utter chaos. The net was soon untangled and the Major's rooster was placed inside the converted lobster trap.

There were scratches and peck marks all over the Private. He looked like he just came out of a washing

machine and the net was ruined. The Major walked over to the rooster wrangler reaching into his pocket. He gave the wounded soldier two twenty dollar bills.

"What is your name soldier?" I am going to give you a medal.

"Private Perry Sir," The soldier replied.

"You men take the rest of the day off. Go and get yourself some pizza for lunch. There might be a promotion in this for you Perry. That is; if my rooster wins. The rest of you might get good conduct ribbons. You soldiers did an outstanding job for me and I won't forget it."

The Major picked up the lobster trap with the rooster inside and loaded it onto the back of his jeep. Then he saluted the men and climbed back into his vehicle. The jeep drove away as fast as it arrived. The soldiers looked at one another.

"Who likes pepperoni?" The Corporal asked the others.

"That sounds good to me. Let's go down to Bust That Crust Pizza and Toasted Subs," Perry replied.

Private Perry and the rest soldiers were all too willing to consume a free lunch at the expense of the Major. The troops headed towards the pizza shop while Private Perry checked his elbow tending to a nasty scratch that was still bleeding while wondering if it would get infected.

CHAPTER 27

Over 100 soldiers gathered at the city pool on the evening of the cockfight. The tickets cost five bucks and civilians were not invited. There were four kegs of beer conveniently located at each corner of the pool. Draft beer cost only two bucks.

Captain Grimes was in charge of the beer concession. He appointed four non-commissioned officers to pour the suds and collect the cash. Major Flak took tickets and took the money at the front entrance. The crates with the hens went to the shallow end while the deep end was reserved for the battling birds. This was going to be the first sanctioned tournament on the island in nearly 50 years.

The troops were ready for anything. Most of the soldiers were seated on the bleachers accept for the people getting beer around the kegs. Major Flak was back at it with his bullhorn from the far corner of the pool.

"Good evening everybody. I want to welcome you all here. I have to say that there are some fine looking roosters here tonight. I know that people are bitching about the price of admission because five bucks is a lot of money these days.

Sorry about that. Charging you was the only way I knew to raise the prize money for the platoon with the winning bird. They will get a private party down at Peek and Boo's strip club later tonight. Kitty Nova and Vanilla Flynn have volunteered for a gang bang with six holes to choose from," The Major said."

The crowd cheered with approval. Soldiers were whistling and making catcalls. Most of the fight fans had a favorite girl at the club. Everyone in the stands knew Kitty Nova by reputation. A few of them had already slept with her and Captain Grimes could boast the fact he slept with

Vanilla Flynn as well. Major Flak continued.

"Whichever one is still kicking when it is over is the winner. There will be blood. You are free to go if you cannot stand the sight of it. I will give you your money back if you do. Platoon leaders get your roosters ready and proceed to the edge of the pool. When I say "go" throw them into the pool," The Major instructed.

The four platoon leaders made their way to the corners of the pool while Flak took up his position by the lifeguard tower. Flak was shaking with anticipation.

"Make ready with my rooster Captain," The Major said.

Flak said "*go*" then all the roosters were tossed into the arena. The birds cackled and flapped their wings to slow their descent to the bottom of the pool. Then the birds scattered in different directions. The crowd fell silent. They could hear the soft clucking from the hens in the traps in the shallow end.

All the roosters began to strut. The birds were bobbing their heads and opening their tail feathers in magnificent courtship displays. The birds were looking at the hens through the sides of the cages except for one. The Major's bird was watching the other males impressing the females. Then the bird chased down another rooster and mounted it in a perverted attempt to copulate.

"What is the matter with my bird?" The Major asked.

"It looks like he does not want to fight. I think it is eye balling the other males," Grimes speculated.

"I can see that," Flak said.

"Do you think it is queer?"

"Who can say for sure? Maybe it is just confused. All this action must be putting a hell of a lot of stress on the bird. Maybe its pea brain can't take it," Grimes explained.

The Captain chuckled as the crowd began throwing their beer cups at Flak's rooster down in the pool. The tension in the air was building. Major Flak took this dramatic turn of events personally. He picked up the

bullhorn and tried to smooth things out with the crowd.

"All right settle down everyone. Hold on a minute. Someone go down there and lift those hen crates out of there," Flak said through the bull horn.

Private Piling got up from the bleachers, walked to the ladder on the side of the pool and climbed down into the ring. Most of the birds backed away from him nervously as he moved closer.

One of them felt cornered and ran through his legs. The Private lost his balance and fell onto one of the crates with three hens inside. The trap broke into pieces and the hens inside fluttered into the arena with the other roosters. That was when they all began fighting amongst themselves in a brawl of ruffled feathers and riotous clucking.

Private Piling picked himself off the ground, brushed himself off and climbed back up the ladder. There were three hens in the pool along with the five roosters. Then one of the roosters began mating with a hen. The mood of the crowd soon changed as the spectators observed the display of normal behavior.

The troops began to cheer. Then everybody saw Major Flak's bird trying to mount one of the other male roosters in another vain attempt to copulate. The mood of the crowd changed again in a few seconds. Within a minute the soldiers were booing and throwing their plastic beer cups into the ring. Major Flak knew he had to think of something fast to save his reputation.

"That's all folks. The match is over and considered a draw. Finish the rest of the beer in the kegs before you go. Wasted beer is alcohol abuse," Flak said.

The troops headed towards the bars when the alcohol was gone. Many of the soldiers were ridiculing Major Flak and his bird. One soldier stumbled down the street drunk singing the battle hymn of the Homeland while Sergeant Mofo gave the task of collecting the birds and cleaning the pool to two soldiers on his shit list.

CHAPTER 28

Tent city at the cruise ship terminal became the holding pen for all the people unfortunate enough to be listed in Kitty's dirty diary. It looked like a refugee camp with the over 200 prisoners behind the barbed wire. Armed guards patrolled the perimeter stationed at the gate with attack dogs. Inflatable patrol boats cruised the harbor to prevent escapes and curious boaters away.

The incoming storm accelerated collection of occupants. Major Flak received his orders to take charge of the interrogations for the compilation of his Red Book while the scientists searched for an antidote. The lion fish and roosters were transferred to the medical laboratory on board the ship. The storm was two days out and the *R.S. Restless* was leaving at sunset.

The carriers of the virus were scattered around The Homeland and several countries overseas. There were two 215 patients at the pier including 16 showing symptoms. The names of the missing carriers were traced to several governmental computer databases and cross referenced with the postal service to confirm their location.

Sixty eight percent of those carriers were located in 24 hours by activating the computer chip in their Homeland identity cards. HQ authorized the Department of Prosecution to track them down using whatever means necessary. Their Marshals had full arrest powers throughout The Homeland.

Judge Ryan sat on his cot in total disbelief of his situation. His 20 years on the bench could not prepare him for this turn of events. The military police came for him like ninjas in the middle of the night. He was wearing his green silk pajamas when three men in goggles and black ski masks took him into custody.

The Judge resisted so the intruders rewarded him with a rifle butt to his forehead. Today he had a knot there and a splitting headache. He would have traded his gavel and robe readily for a couple of prescription pain killers. He looked at Miss Veto lying on the cot next to him reading her dime store paperback.

"Excuse me. Do you have a couple of aspirin? My head is killing me," Judge Ryan asked her.

He was sitting on the side of his cot looking over at her a few feet away. The woman set the book down on her chest and looked over at the Judge and began staring at the lump on his forehead.

"Who the hell are you?"

"My name is Ryan," The Judge replied.

"That's nice. You are not a cop are you? "

"I was a Judge until I was arrested last night. What the hell is going on around here?"

"I don't know you. If I give you a couple of pills; you might have me arrested and taken to jail. Veto explained.

"Look where you are sister. See the guards at the gate? This looks like a jail to me. I don't think I have any authority over anybody in this place," The Judge insisted.

Miss Veto reached under her tee shirt into her bra strap producing a small plastic baggie with some pills resembling Valentine's Day candy. ." She opened the baggie up and handed the Judge his medicine.

"Here take these. They will do the trick," Veto said. She resealed the bag and returned it to her hiding place then went back to reading her book. After a few moments she set it on the floor and was about to go back to sleep.

"So what is this all about?" The Judge asked.

Miss Veto opened her eyes again thinking the Judge was becoming a pest.

"I'm not too sure. I think it is a military exercise, maybe some kind of biological event scenario. It is sort of like the Triple Towers attack. It should all be over in a couple of

days. Think about it. The island would be a great place for some kind of mock outbreak. Then again: it might have something to do with a friend of mine," Veto said.

"What do you mean?" Ryan inquired.

The Judge listened carefully as if he was back in his robe up on the bench looking down on the accused in a courtroom.

"A friend of mine got sick. She might have passed some of her funk around town. If you catch my meaning," Veto explained.

"Who is your friend?" The Judge asked.

"Her name is Kitty Nova. She works for the swankiest escort service in town."

When Judge Ryan heard the name his heart started pounding. He visualized the diary in his safe wondering if the soldiers had found it or if there was a duplicate somewhere. He began pondering the possibilities thinking the military found the book.

His heart sank with the weight of the realization. He reflected on the sudden and complete takeover of the island then about the quarantine and his subsequent internment. Things started making sense to him now.

There were several people hanging around the tent minding their business. Others were outside sitting on the sea wall taking in the fresh air or loitering on the beach down the road from the waiting ship. The people he saw had one thing in common. They were all listed in Kitty Nova's diary.

He wondered if the sequence of events could really be a training exercise. Then the Judge saw Slammer on the other side of the tent talking to Crab. He recognized them as members of the Lighthouse Gang. They were sitting on their cots staring intensely at him from across the room about sixty feet away with hate in their eyes.

The Judge suspected they knew something about the Jones homicide. He also knew that he had sentenced Tony

Laredo and Scooter Jones. Imelda Cortez paid him a bribe to lighten his sentence. He knew it was a matter of time before he would see them again in the courtroom if he could not get out of this mess. None of that mattered much now.

The Judge was about to say something else to Miss Veto when Flak picked up his bull horn again. This time he was standing near the entrance of one of the two canvas tents. He turned on the device and paused as it made the customary squealing sound.

"Testing, testing one, two, three. My name is Major Flak. Could you all assemble around me please?" He asked the crowd. The internees walked over towards the voice in the main compound. After several moments most if not all were standing around the Major.

"I guess you are all wondering why you are here. Last week a person in Key West contracted a contagious virus. It has been determined that there is a high probability all of you are carriers." Flak said. The crowd grew uneasy. He sensed the change of the mood and attempted to placate them.

"Try to remain calm. The first thing we have to do is verify that a person is a carrier, so everybody gets a blood test. The positives get a red bracelet to wear. Those that are negative will be given a blue one until they are released before we set sail.

The infected people will be segregated from the general population and given a surgical mask to wear as a precaution once the tests are completed," Major Flak explained to the crowd. He was about to finish his announcement when a heckler screamed out from the back of the crowd.

"Release us immediately. I am getting a lawyer. I will sue you bastards for false imprisonment," The man said. The Major ignored him and continued with his announcement.

"The blood tests to determine the carriers will begin right away. Those of you found not to have the virus can return to their homes soon. Many of you have families that depend on your income. The government will compensate them for your time here. That is all."

Two female soldiers walked over and stood by the Major with their rifles at the ready in front. They were guarding him. The tension in the air was almost palpable. Another male heckler shouted from the back of the crowd.

"We don't have to let them boss us around," Another voice from the crowd said. Others began voicing their discontent. The Major sensed a growing hostility within the mass of people.

"Everybody return to your cots and wait for the blood test. Those found positive can take one suitcase to the ship. You will be given time to call your relatives before we go. All cell phones will then be confiscated. The loading of passengers will begin at six in the evening tomorrow. The ship will depart two hours later," Flak explained.

"We are not going anywhere." A female voice said with some conviction behind the Major. The hidden malcontent was well evident in the back of the crowd. The guard next to the Major stared at her for a moment then left the Major's side and walked over to her. The heckler was not scared even though the guard was much bigger than her.

"Get the hell out of here you dyke. Go back downtown with your macho girlfriends and the rest of your kind in drag," She yelled.

The guard looked into her eyes and did not say a word. This soldier was a fine specimen. She was a former Olympian, made of muscle and solid as an oak tree. She was a proven killer on the battlefield and was more than equal to the best of men in combat situations. She had just returned from three tours in Iranastan with a cigar box full of medals.

The protestor made a horrible sound and then the

unthinkable happened in front of everyone. The heckler's face contorted as she pulled a knot of mucous from the deepest recesses of her lung. Then she sent the slimy projectile flying through the air landing right on the soldier's uniform.

The guard looked down at the mucous crawling down her left breast until it reached the unit patch of a pyramid. Inside the triangle was a black widow spider with the words blood, money and power in red thread underneath the hour glass on the spider's abdomen. The soldier's response was instantaneous.

She hit her on the chin with the stock of the weapon. The protestor fell to the ground. The sound was like a sack of onions hitting the pavement after being tossed out of the back of a pick-up truck. The crowd sighed as they stared at the guard and the woman on the ground. A loud voice cried out.

"That lady has brass balls," Someone said.

"I can't believe she spit on her," A woman exclaimed.

"Did you see that?" A man nearby asked a friend next to him.

"She is hard core," He shouted.

Major Flak and the other guards walked over and looked at the protestor bleeding on the ground. She was out cold. There was blood coming from her mouth and one of her broken teeth got stepped on and scrunched by the Major's boots as he approached her. Flak took out a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the spit off of her uniform. She looked him in the eye as if expecting a reprimand.

"Well done. Forget that civilian trash," The Major said. She came to attention and saluted.

"Now get that that piece of garbage to the medics. Place her in irons and have them stop that bleeding and give her a couple of aspirin."

"Yes Sir," The guard replied.

Two soldiers dragged the protestor by the feet up the stairs onto the ship. The crowd began to disperse ignoring the unconscious woman as her head bounced off each step on her way to her up the stairs. They went back to their cots and prepared to ship out. The rest of the detainees went over to the jetty to talk amongst themselves or stare at the water while thinking about their predicament.

The next day the infected detainees with their red bracelets and surgical masks walked solemnly up the gangplank when it came time to leave. There were many pairs of eyes looking downward at the metal stairs while they boarded. Some were crying and others turned around for their last look at their island home. Crab nodded his head right to left as he ascended the stairs near the stern.

"Can you believe this?"

"Cheer up Crab. Not every crab in the boat gets cooked. You dig what I'm saying? Some get to jump out of the bucket and flop back onto the dock then into the water," Slammer said.

"Can you swim?"

"Crab is my name, swimming is my game," Crab joked.

"Then we got nothing to worry about. We have to pass around the reef at Fort Lookout. We should get there just after dark. I say we jump ship, grab a boat and go to Imelda's place on Big Pine Key. We will be drinking beers by morning," Slammer explained.

"I don't know Slammer. It is almost a hundred and fifty miles from Fort Lookout to Imelda's," Crab said doubting it was possible. "Don't worry Crab. We will find a way out of this somehow," Slammer said reassuring him.

The last person to walk up the steps was Miss Veto. She thought her induction into the armed services was exciting since her new career began with a cruise. Miss Veto was numb from her painkillers and did not have a care in the world. She watched the lights disappear on Key West from the deck then went back to her cabin.

CHAPTER 29

Slammer and Crab went over the rail with their life vests on at midnight. The *R.S. Restless* was sixty miles southwest of Key West and two miles from Fort Lookout when they hurled themselves into the water. The force of the fall drove Slammer's knee upward into his chin. He began treading water while tiny shooting stars twinkled in his field of vision.

Slammer looked at the side of passing ship through a cloud of swirling water knowing what was at the tail end of that passing wall of steel. He took a deep breath as he bobbed up and down in the waves. His instincts took over when he opened his eyes in the salt water. He felt the pull of the intake then swam across the current, soon finding an eddy, then escaped from the current using broad the sweeping strokes.

Crab was not moving fast enough after he landed. The stern was coming up fast along with the monstrous propeller. He swam as fast as he could to get away. Crab swam for his life as the propeller passed him. He was floating into the churning sea at the back of the ship. Slammer grabbed him by the back of the life vest and pulled him out of the current.

They both could see the lights of an island far away and the seas were building from the approaching storm. There was one thing in their favor. A steady current was pushing them towards Fort Lookout in the darkness. The lights of the island were getting closer. The two pirates began swimming toward the rocks around Fort Lookout.

The storm was three hundred miles away from them when the *R.S. Restless* left port. A south bound front came down from New England and stalled on the East coast of Florida blocking the storm's path to the northeast. Now it

was heading northwest and accelerating. The hurricane weakened slightly while increasing the forward speed.

Hurricane Domino hit Key West later that evening. Enormous waves pounded the walls of the lighthouse on White Knuckle Reef with an unrelenting fury. The sound was deafening and the structure eventually gave way to the force of the water crumbling into the sea. The ghost of the schooner Corinthian had chained itself to the tower trying desperately to hold on.

The phantom hovered for a moment then drifted skyward after the lighthouse broke apart. The spirit was now at the mercy of the howling winds. The phantom ascended, floating towards the spinning vortex at the center of the cyclone. There was a mighty roar and then another blinding flash of lightning followed by the tremendous boom of thunder.

A waterspout formed extending down from the clouds like a gigantic black finger protruding from the sky soon touching the surface of a raging sea. A swirling cloud of mist appeared as the whirlwind moved across the water. The tornado advanced with purpose directly towards the *R.S.Restless*

The center of the storm was only twenty miles behind the ship and closing fast. The seas were building quickly and the wind was increasing with every passing minute. The Captain of the *R.S. Restless* was now heading for the Fort Lookout. He wanted to be as close to shore if the crew needed rescuing.

He picked up the intercom and told the radio operator to send out the distress signal. The communications officer relayed their position after informing the crew to get ready to abandon ship. The radio operator then activated the emergency beacon. He stared at the towering waves from the bridge. Rain and marble sized hail pelted the window as he looked into the foreboding night while the ship rose and fell with each passing wave.

There were several modified lobster traps with roosters on the deck. A large wave washed over them from the port side loosening a rope holding one row in place. The birds inside the traps were cackling and flapping their wet wings like there was no tomorrow.

The next wave that spilled onto the deck broke the rope and most of the traps went over the side. Another wave hit and the rest of the traps rolled over the side. The birds beat their wings and squawked as they were cast into the sea.

The Captain muttered a string of profanities to himself when he saw them go over. He looked out over the gray horizon and spotted a dark shape in the water approaching off the bow. The inside of his head filled with a horrible mindless groaning. He became overwhelmed with a feeling infinite sorrow as the blue phantom materialized on the bridge. Terror rose up from the deepest recesses of his being. He tried to scream but no sound came as the waterspout slammed into the ship.

The tornado tore through the hull and flipped the ship over like a metal toy. The steel of the ship moaned and screeched as the bulkheads crumpled as easily as tin cans. The ship heaved upward then shook violently for several moments then plummeted to the bottom. Then the twister finally moved away disappearing into the horizon.

CHAPTER 30

The antennae transmitting mobile phone signals back to The Homeland from the Bahamas was a pile of twisted steel the next morning. Street looked outside his room window at the Conch Shell Motel. The patio furniture was in the pool and there were palm fronds scattered all over the property.

The scent of the sea filled the room when he opened the door. The first thing he did was take out the trash. The housekeeper had not been to work in days and there was no laundry service. The trashcan in the bathroom was filled with empty cans. He tied the ends of the garbage bag in a knot and set the bag outside of the door.

Street had food supplies. What he could use was some more water. He looked at the coffee machine and the packets of gourmet coffee on top of the lid. The machine was useless now without any electricity.

He remembered Cynthia had a phone in her apartment and wondered if maybe a land line was working. He picked up the phone and dialed her number and it rang at her apartment downtown. A man answered after two rings. Street hung up. Then his phone rang several seconds.

"Detective Street here."

The caller realized he was talking to some sort of police officer and paused for a moment. Street went on the offensive.

"Where is Cynthia?" Street asked.

"She is kind of busy right now. If you know what I mean," Cricket said.

"Who is this?" Street shot back. The man on the other end hung up.

Street immediately called Norman to find out what he could about Miss Clifton. Norman answered the phone at his house. He had just come down from the roof after doing

some minor repairs. Norman set the hammer in his hand down on the kitchen table and picked up the phone.

"Hello," Norman said.

"Good to know you are still alive after the storm. How are *you* doing?" Street asked.

"Everything is cool here except for my roof. I am fixing a hole right now. How is your lady friend?"

"I sent her home this morning," Street replied.

"You sure can pick them my friend," Norman said sounding as if his choice for a companion was not a good one.

"What does that mean?" Street asked.

"Ned got a scanner on South Point and he was listening to the talk last night. He says the police are looking for your lady. They found her boss dead at the lighthouse," Norman explained.

Street thought of the manager down at the bank and wondered what happened. He was one of the last ones to speak with him alive. There is a good chance the police would want to talk to him. The last thing he needed was problems with the local interpretation of the law enforcement.

"Anybody with any sense would not go near her," Norman warned.

"Why is that? Don't tell me she has VD or something," Street said half in jest.

"Nothing like that. She's making her bed with the man of dread himself. That woman belongs to Cricket," Norman explained.

"What's a Cricket?" Street asked thinking about the brand of lighter with the same name.

"Man you don't know a damn thing," Norman said. He sounded serious so Street gave him his undivided attention.

"There is going to be trouble when he finds out you have been giving his girl a poke. He is going to fix you like that other fella. Beat his head into mush with a cricket bat.

Listen to me Travis. Best you forget you ever met her and leave town right away. She is bad news walking," Norman said.

"How come you did not say something at the Quarry Norman?"

"You seemed to be having such a good time with her. I did not have the heart to tell you," Norman confessed.

"Do me a favor; the next time you see me with a woman that is no good for me; let me know before I do something that gets me killed. I have to go Norman," Street said then hung up the phone.

Street called the Director two days later. McGregor told him the *R.S. Restless* was missing and that the quarantine of Key West was over. The Homeland no longer needed his services. He was to go back to Miami for his debriefing.

McGregor informed him that Paul Tucker escaped from the base infirmary then went after Styles. He was with the Coast Guard crew when they found Jones. Street never figured on Tucker. He wondered what possible motive he could have to kill Styles.

The case did not make any sense. He thought Tucker was a mentally unbalanced copycat killer and that whoever killed Jones and Flynn was still on the loose. This brought him back to the Brown Recluse. Street thought she was behind the murders.

The problem was he could not link the evidence between her and the victims. He wondered how she made it to the Bahamas without anyone else knowing about it. The more he thought about the case; the less sure he was of who was responsible for the murders. He believed any outcome would be illogical. Street was getting the feeling he lost his edge and that it was time to retire.

He felt dejected while packing his bags to leave the island. Street seriously thought about a future fishing career. He really liked the Bahamas and had plenty of money saved up. Then he got the idea of buying a charter

boat to go into business for himself.

CHAPTER 31

Detective Street was considering the best way to give the Director his resignation notice while driving to work. He was ready for a change in his life hoping this new direction would help him learn to relax and have some fun. Street was looking forward to opening his charter boat business in the Bahamas. Today he had to straighten things with McGregor. Street knew that would not be easy.

He pondered his years of service at the Violent Crimes Unit as he drove through the urban sprawl of Miami. The memories weighing heavily on his spirit. He wondered if he should see a psychologist. Maybe therapy would help him ease his burdens. He did have a slight sense of satisfaction knowing he solved some of the most hideous crimes in the history of The Homeland. All his other cases had closure except this last one. He just could not make sense out of it.

Street came to the bottleneck impeding his progress. There were three police cars, two ambulances and a fire truck on the side of the road. A fire fighter was busy cutting the roof off a town car with a pneumatic tool trying to get at the person trapped inside. The sound from the device was deafening.

The officer directing the flow of traffic motioned him forward with a wave of his hand. Street glanced at the carnage as he eased his car past the scene. He stared at the two vehicles crumpled like tin foil in the median. The driver of the town car was busy talking on her cell phone and drifted into the adjacent lane hitting a jeep. Three people ejected onto the freeway as it flipped and rolled. White sheets covered two of the corpses and the third was ready for transport to the hospital.

Street made up the lost time quickly once he passed the accident. It was not long before he pulled into his assigned parking space at the office building. The detective exited

the vehicle, walked into the building then took the elevator up to the fourth floor.

When he walked by the secretary's station the attractive brunette told him that the Director wanted to see him right away. Street hated starting his day in the Director's office. It usually meant someone somewhere screwed up and he had to cover for their mistake.

The door was open and Director McGregor was sitting at his mahogany desk leaning back in his swivel chair savoring the memory of the tuna he caught in Nassau only a week ago when Street knocked on the door. McGregor followed him with his eyes as he entered the room. Street sat down in the leather chair holding a manila folder in his hand.

"Well let's have it," McGregor said as if ordering a cheeseburger at a fast food drive through. The Director already had all the answers yet he asked Street just the same.

"Who chained Jones to that damn lighthouse?" McGregor asked him. Street did not like his tone. He was snapping at him like an alligator. The detective did not bother trying to calm him down. He knew he had taken personal interest in the case.

"I want answers and be quick about it. I have a meeting in ten minutes," The Director said impatiently. Street chose his words carefully,

"The answer to that becomes clear when one examines the motives in play. Old fashion greed on the part of Marty Styles and Imelda Cortez," Street said confidently.

"What are you getting at?" McGregor asked impatiently as Street pulled his chair closer to the desk.

"The investigation into Marty Styles opened the book on public corruption in Key West and revealed criminal violations far beyond my expectations," Street explained.

McGregor stared at him nervously wondering if Street knew that Chuck Flynn's killer was looking right at him.

Street shifted in the chair. Then he felt the beads of sweat developing on his forehead.

"The most important thing you should know is these matters are far too sensitive to prosecute because it would severely damage the reputation of officials working for the City of Key West. This case involves corruption under the color of law implicating local law enforcement.

Marty Styles was involved in at least two money making schemes. He worked for Cortez while taking care of business at the firm Styles and Flynn. He also had a job at the jail," Street said.

He thought about what to say next. The answer came into his awareness like tiny bubbles on a pot of simmering chowder. Then he dropped the proverbial bomb in a summation.

"The Jones homicide was the result of a contract by Imelda Cortez. I have a few other theories," Street added.

"Do you now." McGregor replied with a hint of doubt in his voice. Street remained silent for a few moments collecting his thoughts while the Director grew impatient.

"Let's have it. I don't have all day," McGregor said.

"Let me start with Scooter Jones because he was the reason you sent me to Key West in the first place. He was not a reputable man. Jones had a long rap sheet and was incarcerated for possession of a controlled substance. There he linked up with his associate Tony Laredo.

Together they both facilitated the transportation of contraband into the jail by way of the Red Cent Laundry Service. This business is owned and operated by Imelda Cortez. Jones and Laredo were distributing cocaine to half the prison population as well as to some of the guards."

The Director gave him a dirty look. Street readjusted himself in the chair. The leather made the scrunching sound again under his behind as he uncrossed his legs. Street wanted to be back in the Bahamas fishing. Anywhere but there. The detective coughed twice then cleared his throat.

The Director was growing more impatient with each passing second. He wanted to hear who killed Jones. He already knew more about the Lighthouse Gang than Street could ever fathom. McGregor knew that Imelda Cortez was an intelligence asset for The Homeland and she ran her crew for profit while he collected tribute payments for the higher ups in the food chain.

"Remember the cocaine packets stamped with a big X? I found one at the Swell Motel during the Styles and Nova surveillance?" Street asked.

"What about them?"

"That was the calling card of Imelda Cortez and her crew of miscreants. I am not sure of all the players. My bet is that Marty Styles, Laredo and Scooter Jones were working for her. Someone carved that X into Scooter's chest as a warning. She must have killed him because they found out he was an informant for you," Street explained.

The Director looked at Street. Scooter's blood was on his hands. He gave the go ahead to Judge Ryan and Max Coles that turned him into their snitch. McGregor needed a few minutes to digest the information then he looked at his watch. He had a few minutes left before his meeting with Major Flak.

"What else do you have?" McGregor asked.

The Director was intrigued with the twists and turns of the case despite his personal involvement in the deaths of Jones and Flynn. The inner workings of the criminal mind fascinated him, especially those under his indirect supervision. McGregor wanted to hear more of what Street had to say but later. He had meeting with Major Flak to worry about.

Street was missing the key facts that McGregor prayed he would never uncover. He did not know that Imelda Cortez was operating a narcotics empire condoned by his own government. McGregor knew all along it was not Imelda that had Scooter Jones eliminated. The termination

order came down from the Octagon and Major Flak.

"Meet me back here in two hours. Bring me a large coffee with extra cream and sugar. I will need more caffeine so I can think clearly while I consider your opinion on the matter. I want to hear your theories on the other homicides," McGregor informed him.

Street got up from the chair and trudged back to his cubicle. He breathed a sigh of relief when he sat down knowing he was temporarily out of the hot seat. He felt he let his boss and the Unit down since the case had too many loose ends and unanswered questions. This was the first case that got the better of him.

Street was outside McGregor's door holding the cup of coffee after lunch. He hated getting him coffee thinking that was not part of his job description. The Director walked by him then stopped to face him before entering his office.

"Well done Street. You remembered my coffee," McGregor said.

The Director accepted the courtesy and smiled. They both went into the office and sat down. The Director held the cup and sipped slowly. His lips made a swishing sound as they met the steaming liquid at the rim of the cup.

The Director respected Detective Street more than most of his other subordinates thinking he was an exceptional investigator. He now had the coveted code name of "Kingfisher". Acquiring a code name was normally the goal of any agent working for the Violent Crimes Unit hoping to advance his career. It usually came with a promotion and a fat raise. The acquisition was like losing his virginity only in a professional sense. Street was a now "Special Agent" ready for *black bag* jobs with a license to kill immune from prosecution.

McGregor was ready for more of Detective Street's theories. His protégé was missing the key facts since he did not have access to the Cortez file. The Director thought he

was doing well with the limited information he had available.

"Well let's get started. I don't agree with your take on the drug trade inside the jail involving Jones and Cortez. Scooter never said anything to the District Attorney about it. Maybe he said something to his lawyer. I will have to look into that," McGregor explained.

He was lying to him. Scooter told him everything about the Lopez twins and their Red Cent Laundry deliveries to the jail in the middle of the night. Scooter unloaded the drugs and sold them to the inmates for Laredo. Gills siphoned the money right out of the inmate's canteen accounts through an intricate system of accounting .I have no doubt Gills, Styles and Baylor were behind the distribution within the facility.

My guess is when an inmate needed drugs they submitted some sort of request form to the canteen. Gills took care of everything from accounting department. Cortez found out he was not only skimming, but also asking for more cash to get himself elected as Mayor. The Director cared little about the drugs as long as he and Major Flak received their monthly installments.

"Tell me about this Kitty Nova character and how she stole all that money from the school district. We will save the homicides for last. Consider Kitty Nova's activities as a preview to your theory on the murders," McGregor requested.

Agent Street had the feeling he was caught up in a vast conspiracy where the forces of light and darkness were working together in unison furthering the secret designs of an unknown puppeteer. He did not know how far the conspiracy went and where it all began, but he felt he was into something dark and unfathomable.

"I think it worked like this. The grant money came in from the school district through a non-profit corporation called Readers in Motion. The cash was then transferred to

a second corporation called Two Reale Solutions. Kitty Nova was the Registered Agent of both of these business entities. The grant money went from one to the other then wired to an off shore account in the Bahamas into an account belonging to the law firm Styles & Flynn.

It was a classic hide the money shell game. Chuck Flynn was behind the fraud all along with his wife Nelly. It was his idea. Kitty Nova received the government grants at Readers in Motion directly from Flynn's wife. Those secret squirrels stole a bank's worth of cash ultimately going to Marty Styles. Did I tell you he is building himself a private Shangri-La in the Bahamas?"

"The funny part is Nova could not access the money once it got off shore. She did not have any legal claim to it whatsoever. It looks like all the money in the Styles & Flynn account was going to end up with the firm. Can you believe it? Styles was screwing her out of her money as well as in the literal sense during their marshmallow sessions at the Swell Motel.

Marty Styles and Chuck Flynn would have been the only persons with any legal claim to the account. Both of them are dead. Who gets the money now is anybody's guess. The account is frozen. Flynn left it to Kitty Nova in his will and I'm sure Nelly Flynn will contest that in court.

Flynn knew Styles was stealing from Kitty all along. We won't see that money any time soon. There won't be any crumbs left big enough for a mouse to juggle when the lawyers are finished with the probate. Nelly Flynn goes in front of a Judge tomorrow. She will keep her mouth if she knows what is best for her," Street explained.

McGregor was satisfied with Street's summary of the case. He but he wanted to hear about the homicides.

"Well done Street. Any suspects in the other murders?" McGregor asked.

"The Gills homicide is straight forward enough. The local cops found his pants out in the mangroves filled with

fish scales. There was one problem. He forgot to be in them. I did not know there were crocodiles down here. They say that is what got him," Street said sounding sure of himself.

"So that was what killed him?"

"I expect Imelda Cortez made him a snack for the crocodiles. Like I said; Gills was skimming money from the jail house coke fund and trying to get himself elected Mayor of Key West." McGregor knew it was Cortez behind it all along. He put on a serious look on his face and spoke in a deeper tone.

"That does not make any difference unless you can prove it in court. I need concrete evidence for the prosecutor. All you have is suppositions based on circumstantial evidence. What you don't have is any physical evidence linking Cortez to the death of Scooter Jones or David Gills. You don't know for sure she is linked to that coke with the letter X on the packet. There were no prints on it except for Kitty Nova's. She could have bought that anywhere!" McGregor insisted.

The Director considered Street more of a friend now than an employee realizing he would be disappointed if he knew the truth. The main point now was to close up any loose ends and have him assigned to something else.

"The only thing we do know is Tucker killed Marty Styles. Yet there is no way we can link him to any other victims with that infamous X marking. The cops in Key West already have Nova, Flynn and Mrs. Gills on a white collar something or other and a possession charge but I want someone to go to jail for killing Scooter Jones, Chuck Flynn and David Gills. You got that?"

"Yes Sir," The detective mumbled. Street felt dejected. He got up from the chair seemingly about to leave.

"Sit down. We are not finished. I want you to hear everything I have to say before you leave my office. Let me give it to you straight. There is no doubt you are a good

detective, but I need hard facts now. There are three unsolved homicides. That means three people are dead Kingfisher." McGregor emphasized. Street liked hearing the new code name. It made him feel important. McGregor continued on with his barking.

"You can't place Cortez or anyone else from her crew near any one of those bodies! You say it might be Cortez. That is not good enough if you can't prove it. Who killed Chuck Flynn? I have to answer to people just like you. I do not want to look like an idiot when that time comes. Do you understand?"

"Yes Sir," Street replied smartly.

The Director knew damn well who killed Styles and Flynn. What worried him was this guy Van Wade. Imelda assured him she had him under her control but he was not so sure. McGregor was not taking any chances. He sent Detective Hamilton to follow him and keep an eye on him.

McGregor thought it would easier to submit a sanction request to the Deputy Director to get rid of Wade but that kind of decision took way to long and had to be approved by a committee of seven far above his pay grade. Detective Street felt like a piece of gum the Director had just chewed on for a while then spat out.

"Wade is in Central America. His landlady said he is flying back to get his stuff next week," Kingfisher said asserting himself.

"Do you think he would testify against Nova and her accomplices?" The Director asked.

"Doubtful. I bet he is looking at bikinis all day while working on his tan. I imagine he is spending his nights sipping tequila sours with tiny umbrellas in them before doing the ceremonial horizontal mambo with any senoritas with a gringo fixation," Street said jokingly.

That was exactly what the Director wanted. The further away Van Wade was the better. McGregor failed to see the humor in the remark about Van Wade's sexual escapades

south of the border believing the comment was childish and unnecessary.

“I am way ahead of you Detective.” McGregor replied. He opened the front drawer of his desk and took out a photo of a scuba diver in full regalia, ready to step off the stern of a boat and giving the thumbs up sign. He set it on the desk in front of Street. The detective looked at the photograph.

“Is that our boy Van Wade?” Street asked.

“Happy as a dog with a new bone.” McGregor answered.

“Where did you get that?”

“Hamilton took it and sent it by overnight courier. He needed a vacation anyway. I gave him a reason to justify the free ticket. He was following Wade until he returns to Key West,” McGregor said. He wanted to finish the meeting. Street’s theories would never get to the courtroom. They would be too embarrassing for The Homeland to prosecute.

The Director viewed the entire case as a training exercise since there was no tangible endpoint except for the Tucker trial. The Director leaned back in his chair content with the results.

“Well that is all I need to know. I have a few ideas about what to do with Kitty Nova, Flynn and Mrs. Gills. They better save their strength and enjoy their plastic vegetables,” He jested.

McGregor and Street looked at one another and started laughing. The volume of their hilarity swelled, filling the office. It carried down the halls beyond the administrative offices. The two finally composed themselves and McGregor's demeanor became serious again.

“Well Street; I want to promote and clear you for the next security level,” He said handing Street a document. It was a non-disclosure agreement. The top of the page had a vulture claw stamped in blue ink with the word “Secret”

between the talons.

"Once you sign that piece of paper you are on your way up the ladder Kingfisher. I want you to consider your next action very carefully," The Director warned.

Street read the page. It stated that the file was a matter of National Secrecy and that he would not disclose the information to anyone unless instructed by the Director to divulge said information and then only in the prescribed manner to those persons specifically vetted by the Director.

McGregor reached into his suit jacket and pulled out a gold pen. He put it down on the table and looked directly at Street.

"I can't sign it. I want out. I am going back to Freeport to open up my charter boat business. I have already decided what kind of boat to get. It is a twenty- eight foot Dusky with all the extras. I will be catching fish like nobody's business with a little practice," Street declared.

"You are kidding right?" The Director asked as if not believing what he had just heard.

"I have a boat picked out and everything," Street complained.

"I can give you a paid month off. Tell you what; I will kick in some airline tickets back to the Bahamas after you to tie up the loose ends from this case," McGregor said.

"What loose ends? They found the killer. You said so yourself," Street snapped back.

He sensed something was not right. McGregor usually gave orders and that was that. His body language indicated to him either he wanted something or was about to assign another dangerous case. Either way; Street did not want to hear it or participate. The Director made his pitch anyway.

"I need you to link up with Agent Salamander and work on the Jarvis disappearance. Find out if Wade has something to do with it. Did I tell you the Highway Patrol found her boat floating in the Northwest Channel after the storm?"

"What makes you think she did not fall overboard in the hurricane?"

"I already considered that possibility. The problem is Jarvis and her boyfriend went missing a week before the storm. She was kidnapped by Laredo's pirates. Her mother flies in from Missouri today and will stop by the office this afternoon. I will try to reassure her that we are doing everything we can to find her daughter Connie Jarvis," McGregor explained.

"What happens after that?"

"I will fill you in later. What I want from you right now is to pick up Van Wade's trail and link up with Hamilton," McGregor said,

Street wanted out. He could not face himself if he blew another case. He demanded perfection in his work and this last assignment was a complete train wreck. He did not want to risk any further damage to his reputation. He wanted to get on with his life doing something else.

"Are you sure you can't have someone else work the Jarvis case. What is Detective Webster doing?" The detective asked.

"Listen up Street. Webster is busy right now. Cases almost never work out the way we want. You know that fact. You are too hard on yourself. You are a damn good detective. You have what they call the seventeen - year itch. You are restless and want to try something different. I understand the situation. I really do. You can't let that get in the way of an otherwise untarnished career," McGregor said setting the hook. It was a matter of time before Street took the bait and ran with his line.

"Go out on a positive note before turning in your badge. Rescue the girl and get a free trip to Central America in the process. This is your one chance to be a hero with a nice benefits package. Don't be a quitter who left when things got too tough," McGregor said. He was playing on Street's tenacious nature.

“Who said anything about Central America? I need a vacation,” Street replied.

“Don't get your jock in a knot Street. Jarvis is in Central America if Imelda Cortez has anything to do with it. You can bet on that. That’s her turf down there and it is no coincidence Wade went to Puerto Sueno. Find out what evidence you can for any trial and link up with Hamilton. You should be able to find her with his help.”

“I do not know where to start looking,” Street insisted.

“You are smarter than that Street,” McGregor affirmed.

The Director handed him a post card from Wade to Dinah Fritz. It was a picture of a lion fish hovering over a piece of brain coral intercepted by the postal service. A caption printed in black letters inside a white cloud said; “*Dive the Dream*.” It reminded Street of dialog floating inside the white cloud holding dialogs in a comic book. Hamilton scribbled down Van Wade’s flight information to Key West.

McGregor had him now, just as surely as if he was a trophy fish nailed to the wall above his desk. McGregor knew if he made it through this next case alive; they were going to offer him a position somewhere in the Octagon. It was already in the pipe. Detective Travis Street was on his way up the corporate ladder.

Kitty Nova was still on her back in Knoxville only her legs were not wide open. She looked like she had lost weight. Her hair was tussled like an old wig and her eyes had the thousand yards stare seen in combat veterans. The red spots on her body were fading and her fever was gone. All her physicians concurred she narrowly escaped death and that she was on the road to recovery. The second lady had the antidote flown in from the Middle East in a nick of time.

Madeline Decker walked down the hospital corridor to Kitty Nova’s room in a silver bio-hazard suit. Four

mercenaries flanked her in civilian attire. She found out about the plot to kill Kitty and the interrogation by Dr. Spiff. She had him fired on the spot. His idea that Kitty was a secret agent working for the Russians reflected the paranoia of a broken government in dire need of an organizational enema.

Decker entered the room while her body guards waited outside. She walked over to the side of the bed and peered down at Kitty through the plastic shield.

"Kitty can you hear me? It's Madeline." Nova opened her eyes then recognized the woman above her.

"Hello Babe," Decker said.

Kitty mumbled something. A trail of saliva crept down the side of her lip in slow motion like a slug moving from her lips to chin. Madeline smiled.

"How are you feeling?" Decker asked.

"I am so tired. I want to go home," Kitty replied. Decker looked into Kitty's tired eyes then reached down and took hold of her hand.

"They want to keep you here for a while longer. Can I bring you anything? How about some vanilla ice cream?" She asked her.

"I'm not hungry," Kitty responded.

"There was a hurricane in Key West. The island flooded. Let me take care of everything. I have to go now. I love you Kitty," Decker said.

"I love you too Babe," Kitty replied.

Decker could still pull a few strings at the Octagon, although she had used up most of her favors to get her name deleted from the Major Flak's Red List and Kitty's dubious diary. She wanted Nova moved right away to her home in Palm Beach. Decker planned to hire a nurse to take care of her until she was well enough to take her back to Key West.

Meanwhile in Central America; Van Wade was busy teaching the finer points of English to Rosa's brothel

employees. His classes were held on the first floor of a yellow and white colonial style house dedicated to the sensual explorations of the carnally inclined. He studied maps trying to find out where his parents might be buried in his spare time.

Van Wade asked the bartender for the lady of the house at La Cantina Rosa as soon as he arrived. She told him that Rosa worked next door. Imelda was right. Rosa could make any man feel welcome with her selection of concubines. She was a lovely woman with long black hair and the most mysterious brown eyes he had ever seen.

He thought she was the kind of woman a man should chase relentlessly. Van was captivated by her smile and hypnotized by her charms in only a few moments. There was little doubt it was love at first sight for the both of them.

Wade was lying in the hammock outside listening to the radio wondering if there was any news about conditions in Key West. He picked up the radio and adjusted the tuner, searching for someone speaking English. He turned it off when he could not find anything but Mariachi music.

Wade went back into his cabana and put on his favorite Hawaiian shirt. It was royal blue, with pictures of pirates, galleons, treasure maps and chests of gold on it. He stepped outside into the tropical sun and walked casually down the street into town with the sound of slapping flip-flops at his heels.

The man at the counter in the bookstore was short, chubby with round glasses and a brown moustache. Most days he smiled at the customers when they entered his store. Today was not one of those days. The summer tourist season was over and business was always slow in Puerto Sueno in the month of September.

Wade walked inside the store right past the sales clerk dusting the shelves behind the register. The walls were painted tan with white trim around the doors. He concluded

the decorator was a fan of bull fighting from the two paintings on the wall.

One was of a matador holding a red cape and the second one pictured a bull with four lances protruding from the back. There were also several cardboard event cards from past bullfights from an arena somewhere in Mexico. There were two plastic bowls with food and water underneath a table by the register along with a litter box made from the bottom of a case of beer from the state owned brewery.

A scruffy grey cat was lying on his side between the bowls and the box. The cat's name was Paco. It lifted his head off the floor and perked up his ears when he saw the movement at his feet. Then it rested his head back on the floor once more and stared at the bottom edge of the counter with tired green eyes.

Wade saw a table to his left filled with stacks of various newspapers. All of them were in Spanish except for one. There was a lone copy of a national paper called The Florida Keys Straight Shooter.

He thought of checking on the baseball standings and the batting statistics if there was nothing inside about the storm or quarantine in Key West. Wade liked baseball and any news about the games or the players was worthy reading to him. He picked it up and brought it to the counter and paid for the paper.

The man gave him his change then smiled. It was his first and last smile of the day. He smiled whenever someone gave him money. It was a subconscious reflex put into action by his brain stem developed long ago when his parents gave him coins to buy a piece of candy or a soda.

Wade left the store with his paper and walked back down the street returning to the cabana. He sat down on the bamboo chair that creaked under his weight. Then he began searching the paper for any news about the island. An article on the back page caught his attention.

“Marine Guard Searching for Missing Ship”

(Key West, FL.) The Marine Guard has begun a massive effort to locate a ship lost at sea. The medical evacuation ship R.S. Restless recently diverted from the Bahamas to Key West to help evacuate civilians suffering from the recent outbreak of avian flu. The ship departed the island last week with several dozen passengers and a load of unspecified cargo in the wake of Hurricane Domino. Field Commander Williams at Tampa Station stated they located the ship’s emergency beacon as the hurricane entered the Florida Straits. They then lost contact with the vessel. “Our hearts go out to all the family and friends of the lost souls. Our mission now is to search for life boats, wreckage and any survivors,” Commander Williams said.

Van Wade got up from the chair and walked to a cluster of palm trees behind his cabana. The hammock strung out between two of the trees seemed to beckon him like an old friend. He crawled inside the webbed cocoon once more looking upwards through the fronds into a blue sky and it was not long before he fell asleep. Wade did not dream of the desert that day. He was with his parents again watching a man on a tightrope juggling bowling pins at Mallory Square under a rainbow coloured sky.

CONCH CHOWDER

Detective Travis Street wants out of the Violent Crimes Unit so he can retire and start a charter boat business in the Bahamas. His boss Chase McGregor has other plans for him. He needs Street down in Central America for his own reasons. Travis Street is his pawn once again in a game of life and death when he is called upon to recue Miss Connie Jarvis from the evil clutches of Viper Mining Company. Will Travis he get out of Central America alive? Read the next exciting novel CONCH CHOWDER and find out.